The First Mrs. Fraser

A COMEDY IN THREE ACTS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The First Mrs. Fraser

A Comedy in Three Acts

By St. John Ervine

HERBERT B. DOWNS

NEW YORK

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1930

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SET UP BY BROWN BROTHERS LINOTYPERS
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To
W. GRAHAM BROWNE

The theme of this play was proposed to me by my wife, to whose criticism while it was being written and rehearsed, I am deeply indebted.

THE FIRST MRS. FRASER was performed for the first time at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, July 2, 1929, under the management of Horace Watson and Alban B. Limpus. The Play was produced by W. Graham Browne with the following

CAST

NINIAN FRASER . . .	Robert Andrews
MABEL	Millie Wolf
JAMES FRASER . . .	Henry Ainley
JANET FRASER . . .	Marie Tempest
PHILIP LOGAN . . .	W. Graham Browne
MURDO FRASER . . .	Frank Allenby
ALICE FRASER . . .	Margaretta Scott
ELSIE FRASER . . .	Ursula Jeans

The Scene was designed by Aubrey Hammond and painted by Alick Johnstone.

ACT I

Janet Fraser's Flat in Knightsbridge.

ACT II

The same. A fortnight later.

ACT III

The same. Six months later.

THE TIME: Is the Present.

THE FIRST MRS. FRASER was performed for the first time in America at the Princess Theatre, Chicago, Ill., on Monday, November 11, 1929, under the management of William A. Brady. The play was produced by Grace George.

CAST

NINIAN FRASER	. . . .	John Halloran
MABEL	. . . . .	Emily Hamill
JAMES FRASER	. . . .	A. E. Matthews
JANET FRASER	. . . .	Grace George
PHILIP LOGAN	. . . .	Lawrence Grossmith
MURDO FRASER	. . . .	Eric Elliott
ALICE FRASER	. . . .	Annabella Murray
ELSIE FRASER	. . . .	Carol Goodner

Setting by Livingston Platt.

Scenery built by Martin Turner. Painted by Kennel & Entwisle.

THE FIRST MRS. FRASER

ACT I

Scene: Janet Fraser's Flat in Knightsbridge. It is the late afternoon, not quite tea-time, but near enough to that hour to make the thought of tea very agreeable.

(NINIAN FRASER *is sprawling on the sofa in the pleasantly-furnished sitting-room of his mother's flat in Knightsbridge, reading a novel by Mr. Edgar Wallace, which is very wrong of him, for* NINIAN *is in his last year at Oxford and his thoughts should be on sterner stuff. He is an attractive-looking lad, able to make disagreeable remarks in an agreeable manner, and he has a way of smiling when he is about to be nasty, which renders his remarks less irritating than they might be if he kept his looks severe. At the back of the scene, in the wall, is a door which leads to a wide passage, off which the hall runs to the outer door. The sitting-room door opens and the maid,* MABEL, *enters.* JAMES FRASER *can be seen in the passage.*)

MABEL. Mr. Fraser!

(JAMES FRASER, *whose age is about fifty-five, enters. He is a tall, heavily-built man, with greying hair, but his step is active and his manner is swift and decided. An emotional man, in some respects, but quick to see where an advantage may be taken. He pauses awkwardly in the doorway and then advances a little way into the room.*)

NINIAN (*without looking up*). Oh, hullo, Murdo!

(*One discovers with a slight shock that* NINIAN, *despite his fine Scottish name, has a conventional English public school accent; colourless, unvaried, with flattened vowels and elided con-*

sonants. He can scarcely roll an r. That's what a public school and Oxford have done for him.)

JAMES. It's me, Ninian! (*His accent has a pleasant Scottish lilt in it. He was born by the Kyle of Lochalsh, in full view of the Island of Skye, and his tones are full of music. His r's have the prettiest little twirl in them, but they do not rattle in the way a Glasgow man's would. This account of his accent is put in purely for the author's pleasure. The actor need not unduly agitate himself over it.*)

NINIAN (*springing up from the sofa in astonishment*). Father!

MABEL (*who is delighted to see* MR. FRASER). Would you like some tea, sir?

NINIAN (*disconcerted by the fact that* MABEL *seems to be putting the question to his father*). Well—er! . . . Father?

JAMES (*decisively*). No thank you, no tea for me!

MABEL. Thank *you,* sir! (*And she goes out.*)

JAMES (*waiting until she has closed the door behind her*). Isn't your mother in, then?

NINIAN. No, father. She's out somewhere. How are you?

JAMES. Out! Where?

NINIAN. Just out! She goes out quite a lot, much more than she did when you and she were. . . . (*He becomes confused and leaves the sentence unfinished.*)

JAMES (*taking his point*). Yes. Well, will she be long, do you think?

NINIAN. I hope not. She's generally in to tea. Is there anything wrong, father?

JAMES. Wrong? No. Why?

NINIAN. You look fussed. And then, coming here, like this! . . .

JAMES. Why shouldn't I come here? Your mother and I are good friends . . . now!

NINIAN. Yes, I know you sometimes see each other,

but I didn't know you dropped in to tea . . . like this. How's your wife?

JAMES (*embarrassed by the abruptness of the question*). Eh? What's that? Oh, fine, fine!

NINIAN. Hum! Won't you sit down, father?

JAMES (*seating himself*). Thanks! I hope your mother won't keep me waiting. Been down from Oxford long?

NINIAN. No, not long.

JAMES. This is your last year, isn't it?

NINIAN. Yes.

JAMES. Have you settled yet what you're going to do with yourself?

NINIAN. Read for the Bar.

JAMES (*interested*). Oh! So you're going in for the law, are you? A queer profession.

NINIAN. No, father . . . literature. Many authors begin by failing at the Bar, and I thought I might as well follow the usual custom.

JAMES. You've a frivolous mind, Ninian. You always had.

NINIAN. I owe a great deal to you, father.

JAMES (*glancing impatiently at his watch*). Twenty past four!

NINIAN (*with a severer note in his voice*). Father, I don't wish to pry into your private affairs, but . . . does your wife know you come to see mother?

JAMES (*irritably*). Certainly. Why not?

NINIAN. Like this? Dropping in to tea?

JAMES. She doesn't know I'm here this minute, if that's what you mean, but she knows that I see your mother.

NINIAN. Doesn't she mind?

JAMES. Mind! No. Why should she?

NINIAN. Well, you used to be married to mother, and now you're married to her. That seems to me to make a difference, but, of course, I'm at Oxford, and old-fashioned. Now, if I were at Cambridge, it would

probably seem perfectly correct. (JAMES *makes a noise of impatience;* NINIAN'S *manner makes him feel uneasy.*) I'm interested to hear that you always tell your wife when you come to see mother. You used not to tell mother when you went to see her! . . .

JAMES (*quickly*). It occurs to me, Ninian, that you're trying to be funny. Well, I'm not amused! . . .

NINIAN. That's what Queen Victoria said.

JAMES. Is it? Well, I daresay she had good cause for it. I've come here to consult your mother! . . .

NINIAN (*puzzled*). Consult her!

JAMES. Aye. And when she comes in, I want you to clear out and keep anyone else out that tries to come in.

NINIAN. But will that be proper?

JAMES. Damn it, man, don't be flippant!

NINIAN (*suddenly serious*). Listen, father! You're not going to upset her, are you?

JAMES. Upset her! Good God, no!

NINIAN. Because I can't allow any of that. You see, you're only my divorced father! . . .

JAMES. All right, my boy, all right. I know how fond of her you are. You haven't much liking for me! . . .

NINIAN. Oh, I . . .

JAMES. There's no need to alarm yourself. I'm not going to upset your mother. I want her advice.

NINIAN. But doesn't your wife? . . .

JAMES (*irritable again*). Don't keep on calling her my wife! Call her Elsie. You know damn well what her name is!

NINIAN. Well, doesn't . . . Elsie give you advice?

JAMES. Look here, Ninian, you'll have to know sooner or later, so you may as well know now. It's about Elsie I've come here.

NINIAN. I don't think I approve of that.

JAMES. Man, this is serious.

NINIAN. I'm sorry, father, but you married Elsie without your children's consent! . . .

JAMES. Will you stop being clever. You're not at your damned kindergarten now. Keep that sort of smart talk for Oxford. They've time for it there. (*He pauses for a moment and then goes on in a quieter tone.*) Elsie wants to divorce me.

NINIAN (*astounded*). Divorce you! Father, have you been messing about again?

JAMES. No, she wants to marry some other body.

NINIAN. Already? How long have you and she been married?

JAMES. Close on five years.

NINIAN. She isn't as patient as mother was. She lived with you for twenty years. Of course, Elsie's a lot younger than you are. Twenty-four, isn't she?

JAMES. Thereabouts. I know what you're thinking, Ninian: no fool like an old one. But my mind's young, isn't it?

NINIAN. I'm sorry, father, but I can't work myself up into a state about you! . . .

JAMES. Who's asking you to? All I want you to do is, to clear out when your mother comes in. (*He listens.*) Is that her, do you think? (*Voices are heard in the hall.*)

NINIAN (*rising and going towards the door*). Yes. Someone's with her.

JAMES. Blast!

(*The door opens, and* JANET FRASER *enters. She is an attractive woman of forty-eight or thereabouts. Her accent is not so markedly Scottish as* JAMES'S, *but it has a slight twirl in it. She did not stay long enough at that "finishing school" in England to which her proud and ambitious parents sent her—a year it was, and the expense was fearful, involving them in terrible pinching and scraping—to acquire a flat accent. She is a woman of character and deci-*

sion, not intellectual in the sense that she is familiar with the clichés of cliques, but very intelligent. She has dignity and judgment, and there is laughter in her eyes. JANET *is a thoroughly nice woman. Everyone wonders why* JAMES *left her. So, sometimes, does* JAMES.)

NINIAN (*meeting her at the door*). Oh, mother, father's here!

JANET. So Mabel told me. How are you, James?

JAMES. I'm fine, thanks, Janet.

JANET. Philip Logan's in the hall. (*She turns to the door through which* PHILIP *can be seen advancing towards her.*) Come in, Philip. James would like to see you. (*This, judging by his demeanour, is the last wish* JAMES *has.*)

PHILIP (*in the hall*). I'm coming!

NINIAN (*who has gone into the hall to greet him*). Hillo, Uncle Philip!

PHILIP. Hillo, Ninian! How's Oxford?

NINIAN. Same as it was when you were there!

PHILIP (*as they come in together*). That's what my father said to his grandfather. Ah, James, how are you!

JAMES (*without any cordiality*). Fine, thanks!

(PHILIP LOGAN *is a handsome, well-dressed, well-cared-for bachelor, about the same age as* JAMES: *an amiable, unassuming and likeable chap, who makes no enemies because he makes no effort.* JAMES *does not care about him much, but that is chiefly because* JAMES *despises him for living on private means and is jealous of his easy manners.*)

JANET. I'll tell Mabel to bring in the tea. Philip's going into the country to catch fish.

PHILIP. Yes, I shall just have time to swallow a mouthful of tea and then I really must be off.

JAMES. Well, then, as you're in a hurry we won't try to detain you! Let's have tea at once, Janet.

JANET (*a little astonished, but not displeased by his air of being at home*). Why, James, you talk as if you were at home.

JAMES (*remembering where he is*). Oh, I beg your pardon! . . .

NINIAN. Father wants to consult you, mother!

JANET. Oh! I hope there's nothing wrong!

JAMES. I want to talk to you, Janet . . . to ask your advice!

PHILIP. What James really wants is for me to clear out!

JANET. Nonsense, Philip!

PHILIP (*good-temperedly*). Don't you, James?

JAMES (*being downright and frank*). Well, I won't pretend that you are the one person in the world, Philip, that I want to see at this minute. I'd be glad if you went.

JANET. Don't be so uncouth, James.

PHILIP. No, Janet, he wants to talk to you privately, and naturally he doesn't want to have me listening.

JANET (*just a little acidly*). He was glad enough to have you listening when he wanted the divorce. I sometimes think that if it hadn't been for you, he would never have got it.

JAMES. Well, I'm not so very grateful for his assistance.

JANET. James, how nice of you to say that. It makes you sound like the Prodigal Son! . . .

NINIAN. About the time when he had eaten of the husks that the swine do eat.

JAMES. There's no need to be offensive, Ninian.

PHILIP. In any case, I ought to be running along, Janet. I've just got time to catch my train in comfort. Mind, you're to lunch with me immediately I come back.

JANET. I shan't forget. And just you remember to send me some of the fish you catch.

PHILIP. You shall have them for breakfast. (*He turns to* NINIAN *and shakes hands with him.*) Good-bye, my boy! You must dine with me at my club one night.

NINIAN. I'd love to, uncle. Good-bye and good fishing!

PHILIP. Thanks. (*He nods to* JAMES.) Good-bye, James!

JAMES (*with indifference*). Oh, good-bye!

PHILIP (*taking* JANET'S *hand very affectionately and not displeased by* JAMES' *resentment of his act*). Good-bye, Janet, my dear!

JANET. I'll come and see you out, Philip!

PHILIP. Splendid. (JANET *goes out, followed by* PHILIP *after he has given a very perky glance at* JAMES.)

JAMES. Blatherskite! I can't stand that fellow! Always kissing women's hands! (*Turning sharply on* NINIAN.) Why the devil do you call him "uncle"? He's no relation.

NINIAN. I like him, father.

JAMES. Well, you have peculiar taste, then. The man's a fop.

NINIAN. And I prefer him as an uncle rather than a parent!

JAMES (*disturbed*). What do you mean—parent?

NINIAN. I have a feeling that if I call him "uncle" loudly and often, I shall be spared the disagreeableness of calling him "father."

JAMES. Good God! . . . You don't mean to say your mother thinks of marrying him?

NINIAN. *He* thinks of marrying her. I doubt if he thinks of anything else . . . except fishing.

JAMES But she can't marry him?

NINIAN. Why not, father?

JAMES. Well, I mean, she's! . . . Oh, of course, I know she has a perfect right to marry anybody she likes.

NINIAN. But you can't understand her wanting to?

JAMES. Not Philip anyway. I've often wondered why he was so eager to help with the divorce.

NINIAN. It must puzzle you to understand how any

woman who has been married to you, can dream of marrying him.

JAMES. I don't think higher education has improved you, Ninian.

NINIAN. Do you know why I don't want mother to marry again? I'll tell you. Because I find a fatherless home very pleasant to live in. I've had one father, father, and I don't want another, thank you!

JAMES. You . . . you pup you! (JANET *returns in time to prevent a row from developing.*)

JANET. Well, James, what's all this trouble you're in?

NINIAN. Father's in another mess, mother!

JANET. Mess! James, what have you been doing?

JAMES. It's not me this time—it's Elsie.

JANET. Oh, she's in a mess, is she? How very sad!

JAMES. She wants a divorce.

JANET. Already?

NINIAN. That's what I said.

JAMES. Look here, Ninian, can't you clear out?

NINIAN. Oh, come, father! This affects me. It doesn't do a chap much good to have a father who is continually hopping in and out of the Divorce Court. I'm entitled to know what fresh trouble you're bringing upon me.

JANET. Ninian, dear!

NINIAN. All right, mother, I'll be good!

JANET. Now tell me, James, all that's happened.

JAMES. She wants to marry that fellow, Lord Larne.

JANET. Lord Larne. Isn't he the Marquis of Ballymena's son?

JAMES. Yes.

NINIAN. But, father, he's a half-wit!

JAMES. You over-estimate his intelligence. Elsie fancies herself as a peeress.

JANET. And do the Ballymenas fancy her as one?

NINIAN. I should think they'd fancy anyone who

fancied Larne. It isn't so easy nowadays to get your half-wits married.

JAMES. He's daft about her. He's twenty-eight and he has some money of his own . . . left by one of his aunts. So they can't stop him from marrying her when she's free. She says if I will let her divorce me and will pay her adequate alimony, she'll be able to overrule his family.

NINIAN. Alimony!

JANET. Does she expect you to endow Lord Larne?

JAMES. No, she expects me to endow *her.*

NINIAN. Great Scot! Larne is . . . well, all that keeps him sane is the fact that he hasn't enough brains to go mad.

JANET (*not at all displeased by what she has heard*). H'm! So this is the end of the romance? What are you going to do, James?

JAMES. I want your advice, Janet! . . .

JANET. But really, James! . . .

JAMES. Oh, I know, Janet, but you and I are old friends, apart from anything else, and I just thought I'd like to consult you.

JANET. That's very flattering of you, but I can't advise you. You must decide this matter for yourself.

JAMES. I don't want a divorce.

JANET (*startled, for she almost hoped that he did*). Oh! Oh, I see! (*Then a little cattily.*) You may remember that *I* didn't want a divorce either, but I had to have one.

NINIAN. You must take a broad view of the matter, father. I think you once told mother that it was a crime to keep a couple in bondage to each other when one of them wished to be free.

JAMES. If I have any more provocation from you, Ninian, I shall forget that I'm your father.

NINIAN. But you did that some time ago!

JAMES. Och! . . .

JANET. I really don't see how I can advise you,

James. If she has set her heart on a divorce, I suppose you'll just have to let her have one.

JAMES. But I tell you I don't want to be divorced.

NINIAN. Well, divorce *her* then . . . if you think Larne is capable of giving you just cause!

JAMES. She doesn't want to be a respondent.

JANET. Awkward, isn't it?

JAMES. She says it is my duty to let her divorce me.

JANET. Duty! Does she talk about her duty now?

JAMES. No, she talks about mine. It's my duty to let her divorce me because she's young and a woman, and I'm old and a man.

NINIAN. I suppose she appealed to your honour as a gentleman.

JAMES. Aye, she mentioned it!

NINIAN. Strange how women, when they want to do something mean to men, begin by appealing to their honour as gentlemen!

JAMES (*to* JANET). Does he always talk like that?

JANET. Ninian's a very clever little boy from Oxford, but he'll grow out of it. Won't you, darling?

NINIAN. I'll try, mother!

JANET. Is Elsie in love with Lord Larne?

NINIAN. My dear mother, if you'd ever seen him you'd know that she couldn't be. He's an imbecile.

JAMES. A woman can thole a lot of imbecility in a man who can make her a marchioness.

JANET. It's a long time since you said "thole," James. You're becoming quite homely again. Do you still care for Elsie?

JAMES. Yes, I . . . yes, I do! (*But his tone is not so enthusiastic as it ought to be.*) She has great charm! . . .

JANET (*understandingly*). H'm, yes! A pretty young girl is very attractive. Well, all I can advise you to do is to tell her that she can't be a marchioness.

NINIAN. Give her a box of chocolates, instead!

JAMES (*to* JANET). I've said all that can be said on the subject without making any impression on her. She's very obstinate and determined.

JANET. Well, why doesn't she elope with Larne?

JAMES (*shocked*). Janet!

JANET. That seems the only solution of her problem.

JAMES. The Ballymenas are very pious people. They could make a lot of difficulty for her, if she was not perfectly respectable. That's what she says, and she hopes that I'll behave like . . .

NINIAN. A little gentleman! What cads some women are! They want to lead a rackety life and remain perfectly respectable, and some poor noodle has to provide them with the respectability by making himself look like a blackguard.

JAMES. Meaning me, I suppose, when you say noodle.

NINIAN. Meaning you, father!

JAMES. You haven't very much respect for me, Ninian?

NINIAN. No, father, I haven't. As a successful business man, you're no doubt it, but as a parent you're a wash-out! I can't think why mother married you!

JANET (*firmly*). *I* can!

JAMES (*angrily*). I won't be talked to like that by my own son!

NINIAN. Now, look here, father, it's not a bit of good trying to come the outraged parent over me. The only way in which you can get my respect is by earning it. You treated mother damned badly! . . .

JANET. Ninian, Ninian, dear!

NINIAN. And you think you've only got to come here and say, "I'm your father!" and I'll instantly forget how you insulted and humiliated mother! Well, you can't! I'm not at all sorry to hear that this woman for whom you deserted my mother! . . .

JANET (*trying to restrain him*). Please, Ninian, please!

NINIAN (*refusing to be restrained*). I'm only trying

to make my feelings plain, mother. I'd be sorry if father left the house thinking I admired him.

JAMES. I haven't any doubt about your feelings for me, Ninian. In a way I can understand them, and I respect you for them. But I think I'm entitled to some thanks from you. I worked for you, worked damned hard for you! . . .

NINIAN. And mother helped you when you needed help, didn't she?

JAMES. Yes, she did. I admit that. Nobly and loyally she helped me!

JANET. Thank you, James.

NINIAN. But when you had made your position with her help, and were a very rich and important man, you chucked her for a damned little flapper that hadn't the brains to do anything but spend the money mother'd helped you to make. Pretty, isn't it?

JAMES (*miserably*). Janet, speak to him!

JANET. Well, it's true, isn't it, James?

JAMES (*rounding on* NINIAN). Anyway, I was generous to you and Murdo. I sent you both to expensive schools, and gave *you* a college education.

NINIAN. Yes, you robbed us of our good Scotch accent, and gave us a common English public school one in its place. When we go back to Scotland, people think we're English. I suppose it has never occurred to you, father, that Murdo and I suffered a good deal at school while you were prancing through the Divorce Court.

JAMES. Suffered?

NINIAN. Yes, suffered. Boys used to come and read spicy bits out of the Sunday papers to us. Out loud, so that all the other boys could hear. One chap asked me to find out how much you paid for the woman you took to Brighton! . . . That wasn't so damned pleasant! Murdo had to fight a fellow who made a dirty joke about you. Do you think that was fun for us, father?

(JANET *rises from her seat, and taking hold of his arm leads him to the door, which she opens. She*

gives him a little pat on the shoulder, and then pushes him out of the room. She shuts the door and returns to her seat.)

JANET. Children do complicate things, don't they, James?

JAMES. I'm not blaming him.

JANET. You'd better say whatever you've got to say now. Tea will be in presently, and then he'll come back. Though I can't imagine what you expect me to say.

JAMES. I don't know. I really came for comfort, Janet. You're a very comfortable woman. I felt I had to tell you about it.

JANET. Is Elsie in town?

JAMES. Yes. She's going down to the Falders' place in Hertfordshire to-morrow. There's to be a big charity ball at St. Albans, and the Falders are taking their party.

JANET. Aren't you going?

JAMES. I wasn't asked. The Falders are the sort of people who invite husbands without wives and wives without husbands. Terribly smart, damn them! Anybody would think they got a commission on divorce cases.

JANET. Philip's going to Hertfordshire—somewhere near St. Albans.

JAMES. Janet, I don't think I like you being seen about with him so much.

JANET. Nonsense, James. Philip is my oldest friend.

JAMES. Well, I don't like him. He's far too fond of you.

JANET. Somebody must be fond of me.

JAMES. Must it be Philip?

JANET. Tell me, why are you so anxious not to be divorced? I mean, do you want to keep Elsie or are you objecting to being a respondent again?

JAMES. Of course, I don't want a divorce at all, but I—well, I don't want to be the respondent a second time. Another suit, with me in the wrong, would do me a lot of

harm. There's still a great deal of prejudice against divorced people in this country, and my divorce from you did me no good. I know for a fact that I was taken off the Honours List through it.

JANET. Oh, James, should I have been a lady if I hadn't divorced you?

JAMES. Aye. I was to have had a baronetcy, but after the divorce . . . (*He shrugs his shoulders.*) Mind, I offered to pay a bit more, but they said I couldn't figure in the Honours List and the Divorce List in the same year.

JANET. Lady Fraser! Does Elsie know there's no hope of a title for you?

JAMES. Oh, yes, I told her.

JANET. Lady Larne sounds better than Lady Fraser. And then, James, the prospect of being the Marchioness of Ballymena.

JAMES. Aye. That tells with Elsie. She's quite open with me about it. She has no use whatever for Larne, but she wants his name. Listen, Janet, a second divorce would finish me with some very important people. If I let Elsie divorce me, I shall look like a libertine—divorced twice in seven years—and people that are ready to overlook the first one won't overlook the second. And if I divorce her, I'll look a bit ridiculous—an old man unable to hold his young wife.

JANET. You'd rather look like a libertine than a fool, I suppose?

JAMES. Naturally. Any man would. But I'd rather look like neither. I'm in a fix.

JANET. Listen, James. I want to understand this situation clearly. Would it upset you very much if you lost Elsie?

JAMES. Well, I don't want to lose her, of course! . . .

JANET. But you wouldn't die of a broken heart?

JAMES (*after a pause*). No, I don't think so. After

all, young women—well, sometimes they seem a bit foolish! Always want to be on the move! . . .

JANET. Well, then, tell Elsie that you won't let her divorce you, but you're quite willing to divorce her. Can you depend upon Larne to run away with her?

JAMES. I don't know. He's one of those damned fools that are likely to turn cranky at the last minute. I wouldn't wonder if he remembered the traditions of his rotten family just as he was getting into the boat train at Victoria.

JANET. I don't believe Elsie will go on with the business when she realises that you won't let her divorce you. (*The door opens and the* MAID *enters with tea-tray*). You'll have some tea, James?

JAMES. I'd rather have a whiskey and some water.

JANET. Oh, Mabel, bring the whiskey and some water, please, and tell Mr. Ninian tea's ready. He's in his room. (*She pours out tea for herself.*)

MABEL. Yes, madam. (*Exit.*)

JAMES. I wish you could have a good talk with Elsie.

JANET (*astounded*). I! Talk to Elsie! . . .

JAMES. Aye. She'd listen to you. She has great respect for you.

JANET. Has she?

JAMES. She told me so. The rest of the remark wasn't complimentary to me.

(*The* MAID *enters, carrying a decanter and a jug of water, which she places beside* JAMES.)

JAMES (*helping himself*). Thank you! (*As the* MAID *goes out,* NINIAN *enters.*)

NINIAN. Had your talk?

JANET. Your father thinks that if I were to talk to Elsie . . .

NINIAN. You've got a nerve, father. You won't, mother.

JANET. My dear, I think it's comic.

JAMES. I see nothing funny about it.

NINIAN. Why on earth should mother receive — I suppose she's my step-mother?

JANET. It's rather smart to have a mother and a step-mother alive at the same time. (*Pours out* NINIAN'S *tea.*)

NINIAN. My advice to you, mother, is not to interfere between husband and wife.

JANET. I know. The peace-maker always gets a black eye!

NINIAN. Father has made his bed and he must lie on it.

JANET. I think that proverb is such a silly one. If my bed weren't comfortable I should get up and re-make it. Elsie is evidently a very astute young woman. She knows you can't feather your nest with mud.

JAMES. Aye! That's very true, Janet! I'll repeat that remark to her. And if you'll excuse me now, I'll just run along. I'm very grateful to you, Janet! . . .

JANET. Won't you have another whiskey?

JAMES. No, thanks—no, thanks. I must be off. Good-bye, and thank you!

JANET (*rising*). It's been very nice to see you again, James. You haven't been here for a long while. You must come again soon.

JAMES. I will, when Ninian's not here. Good-bye, Ninian!

NINIAN. Good-bye, father!

(*The door opens and the* MAID *enters.*)

MABEL (*announcing*). Mr. and Mrs. Murdo Fraser.

JAMES. Oh, God!

(ALICE FRASER, *a pleasant-looking girl of twenty-three, with very candid eyes and a quiet, but assured and direct manner, enters followed by her husband,* MURDO FRASER, NINIAN'S *elder brother, whose age is about twenty-four. He is less sensitive than* NINIAN, *a little stodgy, too, and more like his father than his mother, but*

quite a decent, thick sort of chap.) (*The* MAID *retires.*)

JANET (*embracing* ALICE). Alice, my dear! And Murdo! (*Kisses him.*)

NINIAN (*kissing* ALICE). You're just in time to say: "How-d'you-do!" and "Good-bye" to father. (*Greets* MURDO.)

ALICE. Good afternoon, Mr. Fraser!

JAMES. How are you, Alice. Murdo!

MURDO. Father!

JAMES. I'm sorry I can't stay any longer. Some other time! . . . (*And he almost runs out.*)

JANET. I won't be a minute, Alice. You'll have some tea, won't you? Ninian, you tell them! . . . (*And she follows* JAMES *out.*)

(ALICE *pours out tea for* MURDO *and herself.*)

MURDO. What's he doing here?

ALICE. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him.

NINIAN. Oh, he sees mother sometimes. What's brought you two here?

MURDO. Funnily enough, we've come about him, or rather about Elsie.

NINIAN. Oh!

MURDO. I came to ask mother whether I ought to tell father that she's getting herself talked about.

ALICE. I say it's none of our business.

NINIAN. Well, you needn't have troubled yourself. He knows. That's why he's been here this afternoon.

MURDO. But what's mother got to do with it?

NINIAN. He wanted her advice. Elsie wants father to let her divorce him.

MURDO. Divorce him?

ALICE. Why?

NINIAN. So that she can marry Lord Larne!

MURDO. Larne! That Bright Young Thing!

ALICE. But what about Mario?

NINIAN. Marry-who?

ALICE. Mario! The dancer!

NINIAN. That's a new one to me. I've not heard of him before.

MURDO. He's a speciality dancer at the Half-and-Half Club. Dash of dago in him, but dances magnificently. Elsie's a member of the Half-and-Half, and a man I know says she's daft about Mario.

NINIAN. Father didn't seem to know about him. I suppose she thinks she'll be able to carry on better when she's married to Larne! . . .

MURDO. I think father should be told, but Alice says it's none of our affair.

ALICE. It isn't.

MURDO. But I'm all for getting father away from her. Then we can get him married to mother again.

ALICE. Isn't he disgusting, Ninian?

MURDO. There ought never to have been any divorce. Mother should have sat tight and waited. Father'd have come back to her in the end. I believe she's still in love with him.

ALICE. And what about Uncle Philip?

MURDO. Oh, he's all right for tea-parties and carrying parcels and things, but mother'd never marry him.

NINIAN. Don't you be too sure about that. He's been here a lot lately. He was here this afternoon, and he put the wind up father!

MURDO. Was he here when father was?

NINIAN. Yes, and father was absurdly jealous!

ALICE. I told you so, Murdo. Your dream of a beautiful reconciliation is a hopeless delusion.

MURDO. I don't think so. Anyhow, if Elsie wants a divorce, she shall have one with my full blessing and consent. (*Re-enter* JANET.)

JANET. Well?

NINIAN. Has he gone?

JANET. Yes. Your father's really rather a dear, Ninian.

MURDO. You're still fond of him, mother?

JANET. Of course I am. I've never been fond of anyone else. (MURDO *glances at the others, as much as to say "See! I told you!"*) Have you told them, Ninian?

NINIAN. Yes, mother.

MURDO. And I'm not at all surprised. I hope everything will now come right.

JANET. What have you two come for?

ALICE. Oh, aren't you glad to see us?

JANET. Of course, I am, darling, but I could see you had some purpose or other in calling to-day. There's a look of missionary zeal in Murdo's eyes which means trouble for somebody.

NINIAN. They've also come about Elsie.

JANET. About Elsie! My dears, what have you got to do with her?

MURDO. She's getting herself talked about, mother, with a dancing fellow called Mario!

JANET. Oh, no, no, you've got it all wrong. The man is Lord Larne.

MURDO. No, mother, Larne, isn't the man! . . .

ALICE (*interrupting him*). *He's* her ambition.

MURDO. Do you mind if I tell the story, Alice?

ALICE. Not if I'm allowed to make an interjection now and then.

MURDO. You see, mother, it's like this. Alice and I were dining with some friends at the Half-and-Half . . .

JANET. What's that?

MURDO. A club in Bond Street.

JANET. It's got such a curious name.

NINIAN. The women members are half-men, and the men members are half-nothing.

JANET. That must make it very confusing, but everything is very mixed nowadays. I had a letter this morning which began "Dear Sir or Madam."

MURDO. While we were there, Elsie came in with a man. I had never been there before, so I didn't know who he was. Our hostess whispered, "That's Mario!"

just as if she were talking about the King or the Pope, and I said, "Oh! And who might Mario be?" I always think it's a good thing to pretend not to know who popular people are. Takes 'em down a peg or two.

ALICE. And makes you feel frightfully superior!

MURDO. She told me he was one of the finest dancers in the world, and that women wrecked their homes for him. Then she said, "That's his latest lady!"

ALICE. Meaning Elsie, of course.

MURDO. I don't mind telling you I was taken aback.

JANET. Naturally, dear, naturally. After all, she is a kind of mother to you.

MURDO. I said, "What do you mean?" and she replied, "Just what I say!"

JANET. And what did she say?

MURDO. I told you, mother. "That's his latest lady!"

JANET. That may mean a lot, and it may not mean anything.

ALICE. But Murdo hopes it means the worst.

MURDO. I don't deny that.

JANET. But she wants to get rid of your father.

MURDO. Well, I don't mind which gets rid of which, so long as it's done. But I'd rather that she should be divorced than father. I'd like to see some mud splashed on her. It hasn't been very pleasant for Ninian and me to see you and father separated, and I'm perfectly certain he's still fond of you.

JANET. Are you, dear?

ALICE. That shows his good sense.

JANET. Thank you, Alice.

MURDO. I'd be terribly glad if you and father were to make it up again. Terribly glad! I believe in the old-fashioned family—cleaving together until death do you part! . . .

ALICE. That's your Scotch clan spirit, Murdo!

MURDO. And another thing, mother. I don't like having to explain to people that Elsie isn't my mother.

JANET. My dear, considering that she's younger than you are, I shouldn't have thought that was necessary.

MURDO. Oh, I don't know; you never can tell nowadays. I saw a woman at the Half-and-Half that night who looked as if she had just come to London for a mid-term holiday. Her age was sixty-seven, and her skirts were above her knees. But that isn't what I mean. It's explaining about the divorce. I don't approve of divorce. It's a very disagreeable business for everybody, except the guilty parties.

JANET. That's quite true. If I'd known the misery I'd have to endure before the decree was made absolute I'd have let him divorce me.

ALICE. Was it very awful?

JANET. Awful! My dear, it was horrible! I was watched and followed by an evil-minded person called the King's Proctor who treated me as if *I* had committed the adultery. Twice I was called to his office and cross-questioned because some ill-natured person had written anonymous letters about me. I didn't dare to be seen with Philip after six o'clock in the evening. Whenever I went out, a man, who looked like something out of a sewer, followed me. He began to get on my nerves! . . . James and Elsie suffered nothing. She wasn't even mentioned in the proceedings. I don't think it's right that the innocent person should be treated like a criminal.

NINIAN. Well, let's hope that darling Elsie gets a good dollop of King's Proctory. It'll be a change for her to have to live like an enclosed nun for six months. Whatever will the Half-and-Half do while she's in retreat?

ALICE. You don't appear to like Elsie.

NINIAN. Like her! I'd like to wring her damned neck for her.

MURDO. What we want—I hope I'm speaking for all of us! . . .

JANET. That depends on what you're going to say, dear?

NINIAN. I doubt if you'll be speaking for me.

MURDO. We want father freed from Elsie and married to mother again.

NINIAN (*passionately*). No! No, mother, no!

JANET. My dears, I think you must allow me to settle my own affairs. It is not customary for children to arrange their parents' wedding. (*The* MAID *enters.*) What is it, Mabel?

MABEL. Shall I clear the tea-things, ma'am?

JANET. Oh, yes, please. (*The* MAID *begins to do so.*) Tell me what you've been doing lately, Alice.

MURDO. I took her to the theatre last night.

JANET. Did you enjoy it?

MURDO. Yes. I can't remember the name of the piece, but it was all right.

ALICE. We got there so late that if we'd been any later we'd have been in good time for the matinée this afternoon! I hate going to a theatre after the play's begun, but Murdo *will* linger over his meals.

MURDO. Well, my dinner's a lot more important than most of the plays I ever see.

ALICE. And the people who *are* in time look so sourly at you when you kick them. (*A bell is heard.*)

JANET. Was that the door-bell, Mabel?

MABEL. Yes, ma'am. (*She carries the tea-tray out.*)

JANET. Who can this be?

NINIAN. Perhaps someone else come to give us information about Elsie.

JANET. Don't be silly, Ninian. Alice, can you and I lunch together on Monday?

ALICE. I'd love to. Here?

JANET. No, in town. Call for me at a quarter to one.

ALICE. Very well. (*The door opens, and the* MAID *enters.*)

MABEL (*announcing*). Mrs. James Fraser.

JANET. Mrs. Who?

(*Enter* ELSIE FRASER, *aged about twenty-four, very pretty, very smart, as hard as nails. She is disconcerted at finding herself in the presence of so many of the enemy.*)

ELSIE. Oh, I! . . . (*To* JANET.) I thought you were alone.

JANET. I was not expecting a visit from you.

ELSIE. No, I don't suppose you were. (*To the others.*) How do you do? (*To* JANET.) I *hoped* you'd be alone.

JANET. Yes?

ELSIE. You see, I wanted to have a private conversation with you.

NINIAN. About your divorce from father?

ELSIE. How did you know that?

JANET. My hus . . . I mean your husband was here about half-an-hour ago.

ELSIE (*now in possession of herself*). That makes it easier for me to come straight to the point. James isn't here now, I suppose?

JANET. No, you just missed him. He was on his way home. Would you like us to telephone for him?

ELSIE (*hurriedly*). Oh, no, no! I want to talk to you . . . alone. (*No one makes a move, and* ELSIE *goes on, a little nervously.*) Of course, I can't very well discuss the matter in front of! . . .

JANET. The children.

ELSIE. That sounds such a funny way to put it, doesn't it?

JANET. Alice, do you mind taking Murdo and Ninian into the Park for half an hour?

ALICE. Will half an hour be long enough? You'd better come and dine with us, Ninian, then we'll all return after dinner.

NINIAN (*hesitating*). No, I . . .

JANET. Yes, Ninian, I want you to.

NINIAN. Very well, mother. (*He goes out, taking no notice of* ELSIE.)

ALICE (*to* ELSIE). Good-bye!

ELSIE. Oh, good-bye!

ALICE (*to* JANET). I shan't say "good-bye" to you, darling. (*Kisses* JANET.) We'll come straight back after dinner.

JANET (*patting her affectionately*). Bless you!

MURDO. 'Bye, mother. (*To* ELSIE.) Good afternoon!

ELSIE. Oh, good afternoon, Murdo. (*Exeunt* ALICE *and* MURDO.)

ELSIE. They weren't a bit pleased to see me, were they?

JANET. No, not very. I don't know that I'm pleased to see you myself.

ELSIE. I don't blame you. I should feel just as you do. You know, I'm fair-minded. I do see other people's point of view. Of course, I know it's very odd my being here at all. I mean, even in these times it isn't quite usual for one wife to call on the other wife.

JANET. I've known it to be done.

ELSIE. Oh, so have I. I know a girl who took the first wife up to her bedroom and showed her some of her wedding presents. I must say I thought that was a bit thick.

JANET. Yes, a little ostentatious.

ELSIE. Still, people don't feel about these things now as they used to do in your young days, do they?

JANET. No—not quite the same.

ELSIE. What I really came for was to talk to you about James.

JANET. Yes?

ELSIE. He's not happy.

JANET. No?

ELSIE. No, he's not at all happy. I have to confess that I've failed to make him happy. James is miserable with me.

JANET. Really?

ELSIE. Of course, I've tried—heavens, how I've tried—but it's all been useless. The difference in our ages is too great.

JANET. There is exactly the same difference between your ages now that there was when you married.

ELSIE. Yes, but I didn't realise it then.

JANET. You're quite certain that you're not making James happy?

ELSIE. Oh, quite! The truth is, Mrs. Fraser, he still loves you. I've known it for quite a while now. I'm too young and inexperienced for him, and I can feel him comparing me to you . . . to my disadvantage.

JANET. You aren't so very young!

ELSIE. I'm under twenty-five.

JANET. Murdo was born before I was that age.

ELSIE. But people are younger to-day than they were then. Everybody knows that. There are quite a lot of statistics about it. But I'm not thinking of myself, I'm thinking of James' happiness. I'd like him to be happy again, and there's only one way to do it.

JANET. What's that?

ELSIE. I must give him up. Oh, I know, it isn't going to be very nice, but I'm prepared to make the sacrifice!

JANET. I don't quite follow you. I understood from James that you wanted to divorce him.

ELSIE. Well, yes, of course, but that's only a formality. It doesn't matter so much for a man as it does for a woman, and a woman has to think of her reputation sometimes. Now, listen, Mrs. Fraser, I've thought of an idea. You see, I've realised only too well that James loves you; not me. I only roused his passion! . . .

JANET (*a little shocked*). Oh, did you?

ELSIE. I'm sure of it. Now wouldn't it be wrong of me to keep you two apart? I've always said that it is a crime to make a couple who do not love each other live together.

JANET. Tell me about your good idea.

ELSIE. I'm glad you're interested in it. Why shouldn't James return to his old love?

JANET. You mean me?

ELSIE. Yes. Won't you take him back?

JANET. Aren't you being impertinent?

ELSIE. Oh, please, don't be angry with me. I know I express myself badly, but I'm trying to do the best for everybody. I don't seem able somehow to enter into James' ways. He loves to tell Scotch jokes, and I can't understand them, apart from seeing anything funny in them. Now you probably have an instinct for that sort of thing. Oh, I know it's a trifle, but it's the sort of trifle that tells, don't you think?

JANET. You're not quite telling me the whole story. You want to marry Lord Larne.

ELSIE. Oh, yes, and I'm going to. He's devoted to me.

JANET. Aren't you just a little more anxious to be Lady Larne than to make James happy?

ELSIE. Aren't I to have any happiness? You don't expect me to live alone after I've divorced James?

JANET. You're not going to divorce James.

ELSIE. But I assure you I am.

JANET. You are *not* going to divorce him. He has been divorced once, and he does not wish to be divorced again. . . .

ELSIE. How frightfully selfish of him, just when I've spent hours and hours thinking of a way to make him happy.

JANET. When he came here this afternoon he told me that he did not want a divorce at all. He prefers that you and he should continue to live together! . . .

ELSIE. That's impossible. We can't.

JANET. Why?

ELSIE. I've told you—I don't make him happy. Besides, I don't want to live with him any more. He's too old for me.

JANET. That's the real reason?

ELSIE. Yes.

JANET. Do you love Lord Larne?

ELSIE (*off her guard for a moment*). Don't be silly! . . . (*On guard again.*) Why, of course, I do. I shouldn't be willing to marry him if I weren't.

JANET. Would you marry him if he were plain Mister Larne?

ELSIE. Certainly. I have my faults, but I'm not a snob. Titles don't cut much ice nowadays. It's what a man *is* that matters.

JANET. And what is Lord Larne?

ELSIE (*momentarily nonplussed*). Oh, he's a very good sort! He dances divinely, and never fusses when he sees me dancing with other people.

JANET. Does James fuss when you dance with other people?

ELSIE. I should think he does! He can't dance, but he will. It's like going round with an elephant. I dance *very* well, and I love it. I *love* dancing. Naturally, I want to dance with people who can dance beautifully.

JANET. James never was much of a dancer.

ELSIE. And then he's always finding fault. He doesn't like modern dances. Says they're ugly.

JANET. So they are.

ELSIE. Well, they're our kind of dances. *We* like them.

JANET. We?

ELSIE. Yes. People of my age. *We* like them. I don't run down the schottische and the waltz, so why should he run down the Charleston and the Black Bottom? I daresay the schottische was very fine away back in Queen Victoria's day, but she's dead. She died before I was born. And you can't go on for ever admiring the dead!

JANET. I needn't tell you that I dislike you.

ELSIE. I can't see why?

JANET. Can't you?

ELSIE. After all, it's possible to like a person even if she has run off with your husband. I've always liked you. Ask James. He'll tell you how much I admire you. I've often told him you were far too good for him.

JANET. Are you too good for him or is he too good for you?

ELSIE. I don't like you when you talk like that. That's being smart, and you're not smart. Honestly, I like you.

JANET. Well, that's very nice of you considering that I can't bear you. Now, let's get quite clear in our minds why you want this divorce. All that talk about James' happiness—I don't believe a word of it.

ELSIE. Well, I'd rather he was happy than unhappy, wouldn't I? That's only human.

JANET. You want to marry Lord Larne, and you only want to marry him because some day he'll be the Marquis of Ballymena. Why should James put himself into an ignominious position just to enable you to marry a lord?

ELSIE. Well, I like that! After all, he owes me something.

JANET. Owes you something? Owes you what?

ELSIE. I was nineteen when I married him, and he was fifty. I've given him five years of my youth. Isn't that something to give an old man?

JANET (*indignantly*). He isn't an old man.

ELSIE. Not compared with you, but he *is* compared with me. I reckon I've given him a great deal more than he's given me. What future have I with him? I'm still a young woman. Am I to spend the rest of my life nursing an old man? He can't do the things I do! . . .

JANET. You should have thought of that when you married him.

ELSIE. How could I? I was nineteen and very poor, and he was rich. I couldn't think of anything else. I

consider I've given him all that he's entitled to. Five years of any girl's life are enough for a man of his age.

JANET. I can't tell you how I despise you.

ELSIE. You think I'm cheap.

JANET. Yes, I do.

ELSIE. Well, that's frank anyhow. But I can't see it. I've only got that much of life! (*She indicates a small space with her hands.*) I want to get all I can out of it. That isn't wrong, is it? I'm young, aren't I?

JANET. Stop talking about your youth. Everybody's mad about the young as if there'd never been any young before.

ELSIE. Well, there haven't been any like us before. We're a new sort of young.

JANET. The best thing you can do is to elope with Lord Larne. Then James will divorce you, and Larne will have to marry you.

ELSIE. No, I won't do that. I've a right to ask James to let me divorce him.

JANET. He won't do it.

ELSIE. Won't he? He'll be glad to do it before I've finished with him. I've a nasty little nature when I'm roused.

JANET. I don't doubt that.

ELSIE (*conciliatory again*). Look here, he'll do it if you ask him! . . .

JANET. Do you expect me to? . . .

ELSIE. Yes. Why not?

JANET. There's only one thing that would make me willing to help you to a divorce: the thought that James would be rid of you.

ELSIE (*snatching at a straw*). Well, why don't you do it for that reason, then?

JANET. Oh, no, my girl! If you want a divorce you must get it in the way that he got his. Go to some hotel with your fancy man! . . .

ELSIE. Oh, how dare you suggest such a thing!

JANET. You and all your generation . . . you're

greedy and mean and horribly cruel. You think of nothing but luxury and easy life and what you call fun, and you don't care whose feelings you hurt so long as you get your fun. There isn't one of you that's worth that! (*She snaps her fingers.*) You can't do anything, you know nothing, you *are* nothing, and presently when your prettiness begins to fade, there'll be nothing left of you but a bitter memory. You come here and lie to me about your wish for James' happiness! . . .

ELSIE. Lie!

JANET. Yes, lie. You think of nothing and no one but yourself and your own happiness. You've taken all you can get out of him and now you want to take all you can get out of someone who has a little more to offer. But you aren't going to give anything! Oh, no! You'll go on taking and taking until there is nothing left to take.

ELSIE (*with a great effort at being dignified*). Of course, if you're going to insult me!

JANET. Insult you! Is that possible?

ELSIE. Have you anything else to say?

JANET. Yes. If I can separate James from you, I will, but don't imagine that I shall try to make life easier for you. I won't. I hope it'll be hard. I hope it'll be damned hard.

ELSIE. Good afternoon, Mrs. Fraser! (*She stalks towards the door.*)

JANET. Good afternoon! (*Exit* ELSIE, *shutting the door with a bang.*) I hope it'll be damned hard!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

ACT II

A fortnight later, we are again in JANET'S *sitting-room, and again the time is the late afternoon.*

(*No one is present when the curtain rises, but no sooner has it been raised than the door opens and the* MAID *enters, followed by* JAMES.)

MABEL. Perhaps you'll wait, sir. Mrs. Fraser said she'd be back about this time, and I expect her any minute now.

JAMES. I'll wait.

MABEL. Shall I bring you anything, sir? Mrs. Fraser would like me to.

JAMES. No, thanks.

MABEL. There's the morning paper, if you'd like it, sir.

JAMES. I've seen it already, thank you.

MABEL. Or the "Tatler."

JAMES. I never know any of the people whose photographs are in it.

MABEL. No, sir.

JAMES. Does your mistress ever talk about me?

MABEL. Oh, yes, sir, often.

JAMES. What does she say?

MABEL. Nothing that isn't nice, sir.

JAMES (*pleased*). Ha!

MABEL. I don't suppose she'll be long now. (*Exit.*)

(JAMES *wanders round the room, looking at pictures, peering at books and papers and glancing out of the window. He takes out his watch and glances impatiently at it.*)

JAMES (*alone*). She *would* be out when I call. I expect she's gallivanting about with that ass, Logan. Why can't women stay in their homes! Always running

about all over the damned place. What the devil they do all day! . . .

(*The door opens, and* JAMES, *turning eagerly to greet* JANET, *murmurs "Ah, at last!" but it is not* JANET *who enters; it is* PHILIP LOGAN. *"Blast!" says* JAMES, *turning away in disgust.*)

PHILIP. How're you, James? Mabel told me you were in here alone, and she was sure you'd be glad of a chat with me.

JAMES. That's a very optimistic young woman.

PHILIP (*not at all put out by* JAMES' *surliness*). And how are you?

JAMES (*determined not to be agreeable*). Oh, so-so!

PHILIP. I'm sorry to hear that. What's the matter? Nothing serious, I hope?

JAMES. No, nothing serious.

PHILIP. Well, that's all right! I called to see Janet. Mabel said she's out, so I said I'd wait for her.

JAMES. There was no need for you to do that.

PHILIP. That's where you're wrong, James. And, by the way, why are *you* hanging about here so much!

JAMES. Hanging about! . . . Why the deuce shouldn't I hang about? Janet's my wife! . . .

PHILIP. No, she's not. And I may as well tell you, James, that I hope before long that she'll be mine.

JAMES. Yours! . . .

PHILIP. Yes, and I can't say I greatly care to have you running in and out of the house as if you belonged to it.

JAMES. Damn you, Logan! . . .

PHILIP. I think you ought to have more consideration for Janet. A pretty lot of talk there'll be if people get to hear that you are always dropping in on her—a chap that's been through the divorce court. I must say I don't like it.

JAMES. Who the hell cares whether you like it or not? . . .

PHILIP. Now, it's not a bit of use losing your temper,

James. As a man of the world, you must know that a single woman has to be very careful about the sort of man she lets into her house, and I ask you what the average cat, male or female, would make of your presence here?

JAMES. Mr. Logan! . . .

PHILIP (*who won't be interrupted*). Wait a minute! I haven't finished yet. I put it to you, as one man of the world to another, that if people get to hear that a man with your reputation is visiting Janet, they will make some very nasty remarks.

JAMES. You've got a damned cheek! . . .

PHILIP. If you had any sense of decency, you wouldn't come here at all, or only when some respectable woman was present.

JAMES. I don't propose to lose my temper with you, Logan! . . .

PHILIP. I should think not, indeed.

JAMES. But you're provoking me beyond endurance.

PHILIP. There's no need for you to endure anything. You've got your own home. Why don't you go to it? I may as well tell you, James, that when Janet and I are married, I will not have you hanging about *my* house.

JAMES (*explosively*). I don't want to hang about your house!

PHILIP. That's all right then!

JAMES. There'll be no need for me to hang about your house. Janet will never be in it.

PHILIP (*complacently*). Ha! That's all you know, my boy! Janet's very fond of me!

JAMES. Look here, I've come to consult Janet on urgent private business, and I prefer to consult her alone, so you'll oblige me by going now.

PHILIP. Well, if it really is urgent private business! . . .

JAMES. It is.

PHILIP. All right. (*He presses the bell.*) I'll leave a

message for Janet with Mabel. But, mind this, James, you are not to regard it as a precedent! . . .

JAMES. Och! . . .

PHILIP. Or to presume on it. You will *not* be welcome at our house.

JAMES. Your house! (*The* MAID *enters.*)

MABEL (*to* JAMES). You rang, sir?

PHILIP. No, Mabel, I did. Will you please tell Mrs. Fraser when she returns that I have two tickets for the theatre to-night and that I'd like her to dine with me.

MABEL. Very good, sir.

PHILIP. I'll call for her at a quarter to seven! Then we can dine in comfort.

MABEL. Yes, sir.

PHILIP. You won't forget to tell her?

MABEL. No, sir, I shan't forget.

PHILIP. A quarter to seven. (*He goes to the door.*) Oh, good-bye, James.

JAMES. Good-bye!

PHILIP. Remember what I said. (JAMES *turns away impatiently.*) Well, I'll run along now and get dressed. Ta, ta!

JAMES (*mockingly*). Ta, ta! (*Exit* PHILIP *followed by* MABEL.) (JAMES *waits a moment or two, then he goes to the door and opens it.*) Mabel!

MABEL (*off*). Yes, sir? (JAMES *returns to the centre of the room, and as he does so, the* MAID *enters.*)

JAMES. You needn't bother about Mr. Logan's message to Mrs. Fraser. I'll give it to her.

MABEL. Oh, very good, sir! Thank you, sir! (*Exit.*)

JAMES (*alone*). Damned fool, talking to me like that! What on earth Janet can see in him I can't imagine. (*The telephone bell rings. He pauses for a second and then picks up the receiver.*) Yes! No, this isn't the Albert Hall. No, I'm sorry, but it's not my fault, is it? Oh, go to hell! . . . (*Bangs the receiver down on*

the holder.) Anybody'd think I'd given him the wrong number. Silly fool! . . . (*A moment later* JANET *enters.*)

JANET. Was that the telephone, James?

JAMES. Yes. Someone wanted the Albert Hall.

JANET. The Albert Hall seems to get rung up a lot now, since they gave up music and took up boxing! . . . What brings you here?

JAMES. I just happened to be passing, and I thought I'd drop in. As a matter of fact, Janet, I've got a couple of tickets for a theatre to-night, and I wondered if you'd care to have a bite of dinner with me and go on to the play afterwards.

JANET. I'd love it, James, but what about Elsie? Won't she want to go with you?

JAMES. She has something else on to-night.

JANET. Well, if you're quite sure you'd like me to, and that Elsie won't mind, I will.

JAMES. I'm perfectly sure, Janet. Thank you.

JANET. What's the name of the play?

JAMES (*confused*). Oh, I don't rightly remember its name. You see, the tickets were given to me, and I didn't like to ask for the name of the piece. I thought it 'ud be like looking a gift horse in the mouth! . . .

JANET. We'll look it up in the paper. (*Picking up the newspaper.*) What's the name of the theatre?

JAMES. Tt, tt, tt, I've forgotten that, too! The tickets are at home, but I'll come for you at half after six, Janet, and take you out to dinner somewhere. You'll be sure to be ready then, won't you? You'll not keep me waiting?

JANET. I'll be quite ready.

JAMES. Good! I suppose you've seen a lot of these plays?

JANET. No, not many. Philip takes me to some now and again.

JAMES. Aye. Well, I don't suppose his taste amounts to much.

JANET. I hope the tickets are for that new piece at the Haymarket. I hear it's very good.

JAMES. That's the theatre. I remember now.

JANET. Do you know what Philip wanted?

JAMES. Philip! No?

JANET. Mabel told me he left a few minutes before I got in.

JAMES. Oh, aye, he did. I think he got tired of waiting for you. He's an impatient man, I'm thinking. There's no stability in him.

JANET. Did he say he'd come back?

JAMES. No, no. He just passed the time of day and went.

JANET. Perhaps he'll come in later. He lives quite near! . . .

JAMES. Perhaps. Mind you, Janet, if he should happen to come in and suggest going to the theatre to you, you'll recollect that you're going with me.

JANET. Of course, James. But what makes you think he'll want to take me to-night?

JAMES. He's the sort of man that if he knew you were in the notion of going to the theatre with somebody else, would manœuvre to get you to go with him. I don't like that sort of spirit.

JANET. Has Elsie been back long from the country?

JAMES. About four days.

JANET. Did she enjoy herself?

JAMES. I think so. She's being very difficult, Janet.

JANET. Is she, James?

JAMES. Aye. It's terribly worrying and upsetting when a woman's difficult.

JANET. I'm sure it is about as worrying and upsetting as when a man's difficult.

JAMES. Mebbe you're right. I'm sorry, Janet, if I caused you . . .

JANET (*with a wry smile*). It doesn't matter now, James.

JAMES. I see no end to this business, but misery and anxiety.

JANET. Is it quite hopeless?

JAMES. I'm afraid so.

JANET. You'd better let her go. (*He does not reply.*) Are you still in love with her?

JAMES. I'd rather not discuss that, Janet.

JANET (*rebuffed*). I'm sorry! I didn't mean to . . .

JAMES (*realising that she misunderstands him*). Oh, no, my dear, that's not it! Only somehow talking to you about loving somebody else doesn't seem . . .

JANET (*patting him gently on the shoulder, for she is really fond of the man*). I understand, James . . .

JAMES. But you thought! . . .

JANET. Yes, I did. I thought—but no matter! Are you going to let her divorce you?

JAMES (*suddenly decisive*). No! Never! Never, never!

JANET. And she doesn't want to be divorced?

JAMES. So she says.

JANET. It's a puzzle, isn't it? You'll just have to stay the way you are.

JAMES. I've done a great deal for that girl, a great deal, and I've had very few thanks for it. She's not a grateful woman! . . .

JANET. Ought she to be grateful, James?

JAMES. Certainly. I'm a kind man, amn't I?

JANET. Yes, on the whole, I think you are.

JAMES. Well, I think kindness calls for gratitude. She's an ungrateful, *greedy* woman, all take and no give, but there's a limit to the amount I'm ready to do for her, and she's reached that limit. I've done all that I'm going to do for her, and she's done damned little for me.

JANET. You see, James, she's so much younger than you are.

JAMES. I've made allowance for that. Mind you, Janet, I've tried hard to be young, too, and I have a

young heart, though I'm not the active man I was. You wouldn't believe the way I've made myself look ridiculous, learning the dances she's daft about.

JANET (*laughing*). Yes, I've heard about that. I'm told you do the Black Bottom.

JAMES (*sourly*). Aye! Wriggling up and down the room like a lop-sided crab, slapping myself!

JANET. I wish you'd let me see you dancing the Black Bottom, James.

JAMES. You're making fun of me, Janet, and I'm terribly unhappy.

JANET. But, James, you must have known it couldn't go on.

JAMES. I did in a kind of way, but I wanted to make it go on as long as possible. I've always had a great love of youth, Janet. I like to feel that I'm young, and somehow Elsie turned me into a boy again. I'd go to dances with her, and force myself to do all the things that the young men were doing until I began to imagine I was as young as they were . . . and then suddenly I'd see myself in a looking-glass, an old, sweating man with a sagging face that was beginning to wither . . . and that sight took all the fun out of me! I learned then, that it's useless pretending to be young. I'd look at Elsie, and say to myself, "If I live another twenty years, she'll be in the prime of her life, a fine vigorous woman, and I'll be an old man!" And then I'd think to myself, "That's how I seem to her now—old and tired and ridiculous!" There's no equality, Janet, between the young and the old. I daresay we're hard on them, sometimes, but, my God, they're cruelly hard on us.

JANET. Well, how can there be equality between us, James? We start by taking care of them, and finish with them taking care of us. They're down when we're up, and they're up when we're down. There can't be any equality there.

JAMES. But there can be kindness, Janet.

JANET. You didn't ask Elsie for kindness. You asked her for love.

JAMES. Do you feel any ill-will against me, Janet?

JANET. Yes, sometimes.

JAMES. I don't wonder at that.

JANET. But sometimes I feel quite kindly towards you. My ill-will gets less and less, and I'm far happier now than I ever imagined I could be.

JAMES (*almost shocked, for his vanity is wounded*). Happier! Then you don't miss me?

JANET. I did miss you at first, and when I missed you, I hated you. It's lucky for you, James, I miss you less now. You'd never get inside that door if I didn't.

JAMES. I'm not so sure that wouldn't please me better—in a way.

JANET. But I've a good deal of affection for you, James.

JAMES. I'm glad of that.

JANET. I often think how queer it is that people dislike growing old when they love old things everywhere else. I suppose a young face is very attractive and pretty, but I think that an old face, with all the marks of life on it, is more beautiful still. I like the wrinkles round an old man's eyes, and the deep lines down his face and the quietness of his ways and the calm look he has. There's some compensation in age, James, if you only knew it. (*She changes her tone quickly to a lighter one.*) And now you must run along home if you're to change and get back here in time.

JAMES (*rising*). All right! I'll be back here at half after six! Where shall we dine?

JANET. Somewhere very expensive. I'd like you to take me to some place where you can't really afford to go. But I suppose you're so wealthy that there isn't such a place in the world. Doesn't it sound dreadful?

JAMES. I'll ring up all the restaurants in London and ask them which charges the most. Bye-bye for the present, Janet.

JANET. Bye-bye, James. (*They go off together.*)

(*A moment or two later, the telephone bell rings. It rings again.* JANET *returns, and takes up the receiver.*)

JANET. Yes. Oh, hillo, Philip! No, he's just gone! This very minute. I came straight to the telephone from saying good-bye to him. Did Mabel what? No, she didn't give me any message. About what? Yes, I *am* going to the theatre to-night. No, not you, with him. No, Philip, you really must not use that dreadful language! Think of the telephone girl! Well, think of me then! Yes, of course! But, my dear, I didn't know. Yes, yes, of course, come in and explain it all. Now. Yes! Good-bye! (*She puts the receiver back, and as she does so,* NINIAN *enters.*)

NINIAN. 'Lo, mother! (*Kisses her.*)

JANET. Your father's just gone.

NINIAN. Yes, I met him downstairs in the hall. What did he want?

JANET. Oh, just to talk.

NINIAN. Does he fuss you, mother?

JANET. No, dear, of course not. Elsie's behaving badly to him, and making life very difficult.

NINIAN. That doesn't surprise me! Detestable person! I met her young man this morning.

JANET. Who? Lord Larne?

NINIAN. Yes. Do you know the sort of thing you see when you turn a stone over?

JANET. Aha!

NINIAN. Well, he reminds me of one of those. I said something about Elsie to him.

JANET. Ninian, you didn't!

NINIAN. Indeed, I did. His face fell about a yard and a half. He looked a terrible ass. I can't help thinking that there ought to be a society to do something about people like Larne.

JANET. But, Ninian dear, you shouldn't have said anything.

NINIAN. He was looking so smarmy and self-satisfied that I had to. I wish this affair was settled, mother. I find myself getting into the habit of saying spiteful, catty things . . . and I'm beginning to like saying them. That's awful! It's bad enough to say them, but to like saying them is terrible. Anybody been beside father?

JANET. Yes. Your Uncle Philip. He's coming in now for a few moments! . . . Oh, and that reminds me, Ninian, I'm dining out with your father to-night. We're going to a theatre afterwards.

NINIAN. With father?

JANET. Yes. Now, not a word, Ninian! I know all that you're going to say and I agree with the whole of it. But I'm going to dine with your father, so there!

NINIAN. But why, mother?

JANET. Well, it's a long time since I had a night out with him, and I'd just like to refresh my memory! . . .

NINIAN. But, mother, haven't you any pride?

JANET. No, dear, none! I'm a poor, spiritless female, waiting for a man to take notice of me. Aren't I a contemptible creature?

NINIAN (*suddenly affectionate, and kissing her*). Darling!

JANET (*putting him away*). All right, my dear. I know you really love me in spite of my weak womanly nature. (*Kisses him.*) (*Enter* MAID.)

MABEL (*announcing*). Mr. Logan! (*Enter* PHILIP LOGAN, *carrying a bouquet. Exit* MAID.)

PHILIP. Ah, Janet! Hillo, Ninian!

NINIAN. Good evening, Uncle Philip.

PHILIP (*to* JANET). I brought you these flowers, though I'm not sure that you ought to have 'em.

JANET. I'll take them all the same. (*And she does so.*) Aren't they lovely, Ninian? Smell! (*She holds them up to his nose.*)

NINIAN. Beautiful! How long have you been back, Uncle Philip?

PHILIP. Got back last night. Your father's played a dirty trick on me.

NINIAN. Oh?

PHILIP. Yes. I came here this afternoon to ask your mother to dine with me and go to a theatre. She wasn't in, but your father was. And I was fool enough to let him hear me leaving a message for your mother with Mabel.

JANET. And he turned it into a message from himself. (*To* PHILIP.) That's how James made his fortune, Philip.

PHILIP. But you're not going with him, Janet?

JANET. Indeed, I am! It isn't every evening a woman gets a chance of going out with her former husband. I'll go with you another night.

PHILIP. He ought to have his head punched! . . .

NINIAN. Well, as you're going out, mother, I shan't dine at home to-night.

JANET. All right, dear! Will you tell Mabel?

NINIAN. So long, Uncle Philip.

PHILIP. Oh, so long, my boy, so long! (*Exit* NINIAN.)

JANET. Thank you, Philip, for these nice flowers. I'll wear them to-night. (*She rings the bell.*)

PHILIP. Yes, do, and tell him I gave them to you. (*He sits down and picks up the* "Tatler.") They'll be a sort of skeleton at the feast. (*The* MAID *enters.*)

JANET. Mabel, put these flowers in water, and put them on my dressing-table.

MABEL. Very good, madam. (*Exit.*)

JANET. It's a pity you don't like James better.

PHILIP. How can I? I like you better. (*He is turning over the pages of the* "Tatler.") So that's who he is!

JANET. That's who who is?

PHILIP (*showing her a photograph in the* "Tatler.") This bloke! Mario the dancer! Stylish looking dago,

I must say! I thought I recognised his face, but I couldn't place him.

JANET. You've become very cryptic all of a sudden, Philip. Do you mind telling me what you're talking about?

PHILIP. Well, it's rather funny . . . or perhaps it isn't. All depends on your point of view.

JANET. Metaphysics aren't quite in your line, Philip. Tell a plain, unvarnished story instead.

PHILIP. Well, I thought I saw James' second the other night! . . .

JANET. Elsie?

PHILIP. Yes.

JANET. Go on!

PHILIP. This chap, Mario . . . I'm certain of *him* now . . . turned up at the fishing inn where I was staying, late at night . . . about midnight . . . with a lady.

JANET. Yes.

PHILIP. I'd been out fishing pretty late . . . there was good water, and I thought the fish would rise . . . but damn the rise they did! . . .

JANET. Leave out the technical details, Philip, and get on with the human interest.

PHILIP. Yes, but it's a bit thick when a chap goes off fishing in the dark and comes home with nothing. So I stood myself a good stiff glass of grog, and just as I was saying "Here's to you, Philip!" this couple came in.

JANET. Aha!

PHILIP. I couldn't see her face distinctly . . . she was all muffled up, and the minute she saw me, she looked away, but she was the dead spit of James' second. I heard him asking if they could have a room for the night, and I said to myself, "Ho, ho!"

JANET. You would, Philip, you would!

PHILIP. Well, I ask you! I said, "Bless you, my children!" and went upstairs, and, as I tumbled into

bed, I thought to myself, "If that pretty lady should turn out to be James' second! . . . "

JANET. Don't keep on calling her "James' second." Call her Elsie.

PHILIP. No. That would be familiar, that would! "If she should turn out to be James' second," I said to myself, "this chance encounter would be a bit awkward for her if James started being snorty about things!" And then I went to sleep. In the morning ere yet came the dawn! . . .

JANET. If you attempt to be funny, Philip, I shall scream.

PHILIP. In the morning, then, about six o'clock, I was awakened by the noise of a motor car and, being of a suspicious nature, I hopped out of bed and ran towards the casement window. I looked out, and saw our friend Mario and the lady departing. They didn't see me! . . .

JANET. Did you recognise her?

PHILIP. I wouldn't like to take my affy-davy on it! . . .

JANET. But you're pretty certain in your own mind?

PHILIP. Yes. Pretty certain!

JANET. Do you know Elsie well?

PHILIP. Not what you'd call well, but I know her. I mean I've seen her several times.

JANET. Wasn't there a big charity ball at St. Albans while you were at that place, fishing?

PHILIP. Yes, it was that very night.

JANET. You're sure?

PHILIP. Absolutely. Some people from the inn went, but they spent the night at St. Albans. If this couple were at it, they must have left pretty early.

JANET. Did they sign the register?

PHILIP. Yes. "Mr. and Mrs. Hopkinson." Damned silly to use a name like that. Absolute give-away! I say, wouldn't it be funny if it *was* Elsie!

JANET (*grimly*). Yes. Ha, ha!

PHILIP. Well, that's a lugubrious sound, if you like! I've a good mind to ask somebody to invite me to dine at the Half-and-Half one night so's I can go up to Mario and say, "Hillo, Hoppy, old boy, and how's Mrs. Hopkinson to-night?" I bet I'd have some fun.

JANET. More than he would. Now, it's time you went.

PHILIP. But look here, Janet . . .

JANET. Get your hat and coat and go. Another night will do for you. James will be here at half-past six and if I'm not ready to the tick, he'll fly into a rage.

PHILIP. I never really liked James, and I like him a lot less now. A great, uncouth, overbearing chap! . . .

JANET. Man, go home!

PHILIP. Darling, I adore you!

JANET. I've told you more than once that I will not have you proposing to me between tea and dinner. After dinner, yes, but at any other time, no. Now, go home like a good man! . . .

PHILIP. I sometimes wonder whether you take me seriously . . .

JANET. I take you as seriously as I can.

PHILIP. And to think that you married James deliberately and with your eyes open! . . . What *were* you thinking of when you married him?

JANET. Not of you.

PHILIP. No! That's obvious! You had rotten taste then, Janet, but thank heaven you've improved. Well, good-night!

JANET. Good-night! (*The door opens, and the* MAID *enters.*)

MABEL. Please, ma'am, Mrs. Fraser's here!

JANET. Mrs. Fraser!

MABEL. Yes, ma'am.

JANET. Not Mrs. Murdo? . . .

MABEL. No, ma'am, the other Mrs. Fraser. I told her you were engaged, but she said she would wait, so I showed her into the dining-room.

JANET. Oh, very well, Mabel. When Mr. Logan has gone, show her in here.

MABEL. Yes, ma'am.

JANET. Oh, and Mabel, just a moment! (*To* PHILIP.) Take a look at her, Philip, as she comes in. Don't let her see you! And if she's the one you think she is, write a message on a piece of paper, and send it in by Mabel. Then you can go home.

PHILIP. Right you are, Janet.

JANET (*to* MABEL). Mr. Logan will give you a note for me, Mabel, after Mrs. Fraser has come in. Bring it to me, but don't say anything about it.

MABEL. No, ma'am. (*Exit.*)

JANET. You can see her from the hall, Philip, without being seen yourself.

PHILIP. Good. (*And he goes out.*) (*A moment or two later, the* MAID *enters again.*)

MABEL. Mrs. James Fraser! (ELSIE, *obviously determined to be unpleasant, enters.*)

JANET. How do you do! (ELSIE *makes no reply. She waits until the* MAID *has closed the door. Then she lets out.*)

ELSIE. I've come to see you! . . .

JANET. Sit down, won't you.

ELSIE (*still standing*). You must please prevent your son from insulting me in public.

JANET. Do sit down.

ELSIE. I shan't stay long . . .

JANET. Nevertheless, sit down. You'll feel more comfortable sitting than standing. (ELSIE *hesitates for a moment. Then she seats herself. So does* JANET. *As they do so, the* MAID *enters carrying a penciled note on a silver tray. She takes it to* JANET *who glances through it.*) Thank you, Mabel. There's no answer. (*Exit* MAID.) What do you want me to do?

ELSIE. You must forbid Ninian to insult me to my friends.

JANET. Has he insulted you?

ELSIE. Yes. Grossly, unforgivably! He said things about me that no gentleman would say about any woman.

JANET. Oh! That doesn't sound like Ninian. What did he say?

ELSIE. Cruel, wounding things! I'm not sure that I couldn't have him prosecuted for libel.

JANET. As bad as that! Well, why don't you prosecute him?

ELSIE. I don't want to make a fuss. I don't believe in making a fuss. No one can say that I ever made a fuss. To begin with, he isn't worth it! . . .

JANET. No?

ELSIE. And in the second place, I don't believe in washing dirty linen in public.

JANET. Then the linen *is* dirty?

ELSIE. I'm not trying to be clever, Mrs. Fraser.

JANET. Don't you think, that instead of flouncing in here and giving yourself airs of indignation you'd much better tell me quietly what it was that Ninian did say?

ELSIE. Anybody'd feel indignant after the way I've been treated. I must say I always thought that Ninian was a gentleman, even if he wasn't anything else! . . .

JANET. Yes . . . well, what did he say?

ELSIE. He met Lord Larne this morning, and said some very insulting things about me. Larne was frightfully hurt, and he came to see me about it. I simply couldn't bear it. I sent him to his club to wait for me . . . he's there now . . . while I came straight to you to protest against Ninian's ungentlemanly behaviour.

JANET. You still haven't told me what he said to Lord Larne.

ELSIE. Well, he went up to Button . . . that's my name for Lord Larne . . . who had a headache . . . he often has headaches . . . and he said, "I hear you want to marry my father's wife! . . . "

JANET. Well, that's true, isn't it?

ELSIE. That wasn't all he said. While Button was trying to think of something to say, Ninian added, "I heartily congratulate my father!" Right out in front of everybody! Such a rude thing to say . . . and in public, too! Mrs. Fraser, you simply must put a stop to this sort of thing. I'm sure I've never expected much consideration from Murdo *or* Ninian, but I did at least expect that they would behave like gentlemen. After all, they've both been to public schools, and that does count even in these days. No matter what a man's private feelings may be, he should always behave like a gentleman . . . in public anyhow!

JANET. And ought ladies always to behave like ladies?

ELSIE. I'm not talking about ladies, and, anyhow, everybody knows that it's different for a woman.

JANET. But surely the principle's the same? . . .

ELSIE. I've always understood that a gentleman never mentions a woman's name in public . . . in a club or in any place like that . . . except, of course, in a nice way.

JANET. What exactly do you expect me to do?

ELSIE. I've told you. He's not to talk about me any more.

JANET. But it's natural that he should talk about you. After all, you're a sort of relation. A boy likes to know how long he may expect his step-mother to continue to be his step-mother. I think that what he said about you was most filial.

ELSIE. Well, I don't! It was meant to be nasty, and it was nasty.

JANET. What makes you think that I want to prevent him from being nasty to you?

ELSIE. Was it you, then? Did you incite him to say what he did?

JANET. No, of course I didn't, but why should you expect me to resent it?

ELSIE. Well! Surely you want people to regard him as a gentleman?

JANET. Ninian *is* a gentleman. Get rid of the *Home Chat* notion that gentlemen always talk about women in a chivalrous manner. They don't.

ELSIE (*rising*). Of course, if you're going to encourage him! . . .

JANET. I shall neither encourage nor discourage him. Sit down!

ELSIE. I don't think there's much point in my staying any longer.

JANET. Sit down.

ELSIE (*after a pause*). Well, just for a minute or two. May I smoke?

JANET. Certainly.

(ELSIE *takes a cigarette case out of her vanity bag and lights a cigarette.*)

ELSIE (*exhibiting the cigarette case*). Pretty, isn't it? James gave it to me.

JANET. I expect he gives you many presents?

ELSIE (*putting the case away*). Yes. I will say that for him. He's pretty generous. Did he give you much? . . .

JANET (*ignoring the question*). What about this divorce of yours?

ELSIE. Oh, that! That's all right!

JANET. Is it?

ELSIE. Yes, I expect James will do what I want!

JANET. Why should he? (*Hurriedly.*) Now, don't tell me it's only what a gentleman would do. I've taken an intense dislike to gentlemen in the last ten minutes.

ELSIE. Well, it *is* the only thing to do, isn't it? Anyhow, it's always done. I think I can wear James down. I'm a very determined woman, Mrs. Fraser, and I always get what I want.

JANET. Always?

ELSIE. Yes, because if I absolutely can't get what

I want, I stop wanting it. There are no hopeless dawns in my life, I can tell you.

JANET. You're very interesting, Elsie. I think you're the most detestable woman I know, but you *are* interesting.

ELSIE. Thank you for nothing! Just because I'm able to take care of myself and don't let people play the fool with me! . . . My motto is "Get all you can and give as little as possible for it!" And I think I can say I've lived up to it.

JANET. You've been very successful . . . so far!

ELSIE. What do you mean by . . . so far?

JANET. You may *not* marry Lord Larne.

ELSIE (*derisively*). Huh! Don't you fret yourself about that! I'll marry him all right! I've only got to ring him up now and say, "Button, let's bolt!" and he'll meet me at Victoria with the tickets for Paris.

JANET. You're as sure of him as that?

ELSIE. As sure as I'm alive. Button's absolutely mine to do what I like with. So if you're feeling anxious about my future, don't upset yourself any longer. I'm all right!

JANET. That must be a great comfort to you.

ELSIE. I always manage to land on my feet. Of course, James is being stuffy and obstinate at the moment, but he'll have to give in sooner or later, and I'm not sure that it isn't good for Larne that there should be all this difficulty. Make him realise what a prize I am! Only I hope James won't keep us waiting too long. I *could* run away with Larne of course, and force James to divorce *me!* . . .

JANET. Tell me . . . this is just curiosity . . . do you love anybody but yourself?

ELSIE. I love lots of people. I'm quite fond of James, when he isn't stuffy and obstinate, and I'd really be quite fond of you, if you'd let me. *I'm* not vindictive!

JANET. I said "love," Elsie.

ELSIE. I don't follow you.

JANET. Isn't there someone you *love*?

ELSIE. Really, Mrs. Fraser! . . .

JANET. A man?

ELSIE. Well, Larne, I suppose! I mean to say, I don't actually dislike him, so I suppose I must love him. I mean to say, when a woman's willing to live with a man, and have children by him, because, of course, I shall have to have children . . . the succession, you know . . . and I don't mind having them, when it's really necessary, I mean . . . well, if a woman's willing to do all that for a man, I suppose you'd call that love?

JANET. No, *I* shouldn't, but I can imagine that you would.

ELSIE. I really think there's far too much talk about love, and most of it is *so* sloppy. Either you get on with people or you don't get on with them. That's all there's to it!

JANET. Listen, Elsie, is there anybody in this world whom you love so much that you'd go hungry for them and work for them until you were sore and not care what became of you if only they were safe, even if you got nothing from them but disappointment and misery and pain?

ELSIE. I say, what a way to talk! Whatever do you mean?

JANET. Do you love James like that? (*A shrug from* ELSIE *as much as to say "Don't be silly!"*) Or Lord Larne? (*She picks up the* "Tatler" *and opens it at the page where Mario's photograph appears.*)

ELSIE. Good heavens, no!

JANET (*passing the* "Tatler" *to her*). Or Mario?

ELSIE (*taking it*). Mario? (*She is wondering what all this means.*)

JANET. The dancer!

ELSIE (*recovering herself*). Oh, yes, dear old Mario! Do you know him?

JANET. No, but *you* do.

ELSIE. Oh, yes, well. This is a terribly good photograph! . . .

JANET. Do you love him?

ELSIE. Mrs. Fraser!

JANET. You *do* love him, don't you?

ELSIE. I don't understand what you mean?

JANET. Listen! You don't love James. You never have loved James. You don't love Lord Larne. You never will love Lord Larne. But even in the meanest heart there is some love for somebody, and you love Mario. That's the only decent thing in your worthless life.

ELSIE. I won't stay here and be insulted like this! . . .

JANET. Would you prefer me to carry on the discussion with Lord Larne?

ELSIE. Larne! What have you got to do with Larne?

JANET. Shall I telephone to his club and ask him to come here and listen while we discuss your deep love for Mario?

ELSIE. Too absurd! I mean . . . don't be silly . . . I mean . . . the whole thing's too ridiculous! I never heard anything so absurd! A woman of your age, talking like . . . really, you get me in here! . . .

JANET. *I* didn't get you in here. You walked in of your own accord.

ELSIE. Well, anyhow when I am here, you begin to make the most absurd suggestions. As if I care what *you* say about me! As if Larne would believe anything that any member of your family would say about me!

JANET. Then you do not mind him being told of your friendship for Mario?

ELSIE. Not in the least. Only why tell him what he already knows? Everybody knows how fond of Mario I am.

JANET. Oh, Lord Larne knows, does he?

ELSIE. Of course! Everybody does! And if you were in society, you'd know, too.

JANET. And does Lord Larne know that you and Mario spent the night together at a fishing inn after the Charity Ball at St. Albans? (*There is a pause for a few moments.* ELSIE *is staggered by this statement.*)

ELSIE (*starting up*). It's a lie. It's a filthy lie!

JANET. You slept with him that night! . . .

ELSIE. It's not true. It's a lie. It's a damned lie! Mario wasn't at St. Albans.

JANET. How do you know?

ELSIE. He was here in London. He was dancing at the Half-and-Half Club. He dances there every night. He isn't allowed to dance anywhere else! . . . (JANET *takes up the receiver of the telephone.*) What are you going to do? Telephone to Larne?

JANET. I don't know where he is. (*Into the telephone.*) Give me Gerrard 292929. Yes, please.

ELSIE. But that's the number of the Half-and-Half.

JANET. It is. (*Into the telephone.*) Is that the Half-and-Half Club? Yes! Can you tell me if Mario was dancing at the Club last Tuesday? He was! . . .

ELSIE (*sitting down with a sigh of relief, which is a mistake, for* JANET *hears it and wonders why it should be so thankful*). Ah! I told you . . .

JANET. Was he dancing there *all* the evening? Well, it's like this. A friend and I are having a little argument. Yes! A little argument. No, no! She says he was dancing all evening in London on Tuesday, and I say that he was at the Charity Ball at St. Albans. He *was*! (*A gasp from* ELSIE.) But you said! . . . Oh, I see, I see! Thank you so much. He left the Half-and-Half early and motored to St. Albans. Then we are *both* right, aren't we? Thank you so much! No, thank you, nothing else! (*She puts down the receiver and turns to* ELSIE.) Well?

ELSIE. I didn't know he was at St. Albans. I didn't see him.

JANET. You're in love with him, aren't you?

ELSIE (*losing her nerve*). No! . . .

JANET. You are! You're in love with him. (*But* ELSIE *does not answer.*) Shall I tell you what happened at the Charity Ball? You were staying with the Falders, weren't you? (*No answer.*) You went to the Ball with their party. Mario motored down from London, and met you there. You danced with him and one or two other people, I suppose, just so that you should be seen, and then you and Mario disappeared. The Falders never ask questions after dances. You stopped at the fishing inn. You were given a room, and you both slept in it. Mario signed the register, "Mr. and Mrs. Hopkinson"! (*Another gasp from* ELSIE.) Not a very distinguished name, is it? The next morning at six o'clock, you and Mario left, and I presume he drove you to the Falders' house, and said he had brought you from St. Albans! . . .

ELSIE. There isn't a word of truth in it, not one word of truth. I shall go straight to my lawyers! . . .

JANET. Why not go straight to Larne?

ELSIE. You're a horrible woman! You want to ruin me because you hate me! It wasn't my fault, was it, that James liked me better than he liked you. You're too old! . . . (*She stops, feeling that she has said too much.*)

JANET (*frigidly calm*). Lord Larne is at his club isn't he? What is his club?

ELSIE. I shan't tell you. Find out!

JANET. Very well. I shall ring up his father, Lord Ballymena, and ask him! . . . (*She reaches for the telephone book, and begins to turn over the leaves. She finds the place, and reads the information aloud. Reading.*) Baltic, Baly, Baly . . . ah, here it is, Ballymena, the Marquis of, Regent 44444. (*She puts down the book and reaches for the receiver.*)

ELSIE (*before she can take it up*). Wait! . . . There's no need to . . . to bring other people into it.

JANET (*sitting back*). Very well! If you're prepared to be sensible and discuss the subject intelligently, all right!

ELSIE. Of course, I don't admit anything you've said. . . . I feel so shocked that I hardly know what I'm saying or doing. You must admit that it's a most serious charge, this! . . .

JANET. I do. It's a terrible charge. You've not only committed adultery, so far as James is concerned, but you've, so to speak, committed it in the eyes of Lord Larne! . . .

ELSIE (*whose nerve is rapidly failing her*). You mustn't say that! . . .

JANET (*without any pity*). Listen, Elsie. You are Mario's mistress! . . .

ELSIE. No! No, I'm not!

JANET. You are. Why tell lies about it? (*A convulsive gulp from* ELSIE.) You know you love him. That's why you want to marry Larne. That poor noodle can be more easily deceived than James can. You will have Larne for his title, and you'll have Mario for your lover! . . .

ELSIE (*in tears*). No, no, no!

JANET. Yes! (*Then softening her voice a little.*) Come, Elsie, you do love Mario, don't you?

(*There is a silence for a moment or two, and then* ELSIE *recovering herself and speaking with some dignity, says quite simply*):

ELSIE. Yes, I love him.

JANET (*sitting back with a sense of victory*). Ah! Does he love you?

ELSIE (*shaking her head*). No. I'm only one of a crowd!

JANET. I can almost pity you now.

ELSIE. Well, that's that! What are you going to do?

JANET. That depends a great deal on you.

ELSIE. How . . . on me?

JANET. If you're sensible I shall do nothing. If you're not sensible I shall tell Lord Ballymena and his son everything. You understand?

ELSIE. Yes.

JANET. You see, Elsie, there's no doubt about this business. You were seen to arrive at the inn, and you were seen to leave.

ELSIE. Were you spying on me?

JANET. No, it was a pure accident that you were seen at all! Someone I know happened to be there! . . .

ELSIE (*half laughing, half crying*). What damned luck! Anywhere else . . . any other night! . . . What do you want me to do?

JANET. Let James divorce you!

ELSIE. But! . . .

JANET. You must. Lord Larne can be the co-respondent. You said just now that he'd run off with you if you said the word. Well, now you can say it! He's waiting for you at his club.

ELSIE (*crying again*). But I can't! . . .

JANET. Does he know where you are?

ELSIE. No; I just told him to go to his club and wait for me. He never asks any questions.

JANET. He'll be a very good husband for you! The Falders will get quite fond of him! Now, ring him up, and tell him that James has found out about you, and that you've had a terrible quarrel and can't stay in James' house any longer. Say he must take you away this very minute or you'll kill yourself! You know what your sort of woman always says on these occasions! . . .

ELSIE (*half hysterical*). I . . . c-c-can't! . . .

JANET. What's the name of his club? Do you know the telephone number?

ELSIE. Yes. Grosvenor 9229.

JANET. Shall I telephone or will you?

ELSIE. I don't want to telephone at all.

JANET. No, but you've got to. (*Taking the receiver off the holder.*) I'll get the club, and then you can speak

to him. (*Into the telephone.*) Grosvenor 9229, please! Yes, thank you! (*To* ELSIE.) Ring the bell, will you? (ELSIE *does so.*) Thanks! (*Into the telephone.*) Oh, is that Grosvenor 9229? Is Lord Larne there? Will you ask him to come to the telephone? Mrs. Fraser wants to speak to him. (*The* MAID *enters.*) Mabel, just bring me in the A.B.C., please! (*Exit the* MAID.)

ELSIE. You're not going to speak to him, are you?

JANET. No, you are.

ELSIE. But you said Mrs. Fraser wanted to speak to him! . . .

JANET. Well, you're Mrs. Fraser, aren't you?

ELSIE. Oh, yes! Yes! I wasn't thinking.

JANET (*into the telephone*). Hillo! Oh, thank you! (*To* ELSIE.) Here, take this. He's just coming. (*Hands the receiver to* ELSIE *and changes places with her. As she does so, the* MAID *returns with the A.B.C.* JANET *takes it from her.*) Thank you, Mabel. (*Exit* MAID.) I'll just look up the Continental trains while you're telephoning! . . .

ELSIE (*into the telephone*). Oh, Button, is that you? Yes, it's Elsie. No, darling! No! Listen, Button. Listen! I'm in terrible trouble. Yes. Yes, yes. Listen, darling, and don't interrupt. James and I have had a furious row. Yes! About you! All about you! He was frightfully angry, and he said dreadful things to me. I can't stay here any longer, Button! . . . Yes, I know I'm crying. I can't help it. I'll try to, Button, I'll try to be brave, but you must take me away . . . now . . . to-night. (JANET *holds the A.B.C. up to her, so that she may see the time table, and points to the hour at which the train departs.*) There's a train from Victoria at 8.20; we go by Dieppe. Yes, darling. We'll go to Paris together to-night. Just you and me! Thank you, Button, thank you, darling! You are a comfort! . . .

JANET. Tell him to go home and pack, and meet you at the station.

ELSIE (*into the telephone*). No, darling, it was just a buzzing noise! Listen, Button, go home now, straight home, and pack whatever you need for the present and meet me at Victoria. You'll get the tickets! . . .

JANET. Tell him not to forget his passport. And don't you forget yours.

ELSIE. And don't forget your passport, darling! No, I won't be late. Thank you so much, Button. What should I do without you! No, I shouldn't . . . I should just kill myself! . . . (*She puts the receiver back on its holder and turns to* JANET *and continues in a perfectly calm voice.*) He's coming!

JANET. That's all right, then! This is the first elopement I've ever had anything to do with, and really it's quite enjoyable. Now, you'd better go home and pack, too.

ELSIE. How do I know you won't give me away?

JANET. You'll have to chance that.

ELSIE. You won't, will you?

JANET. Not if you do as you're told. Don't forget, by the way, to leave a note for James, telling him you've left him, and that you've gone to Paris with Lord Larne. You'd better get the chambermaid in the hotel to take a good look at you, and keep any bills! . . .

ELSIE. You seem to know all about it.

JANET. Well, you taught me, didn't you?

ELSIE. You'll never tell! . . .

JANET. My dear Elsie, what happens to you after James has divorced you is of no interest to me! . . . (*The door opens and the* MAID *enters.*)

MABEL. Mr. Fraser!

ELSIE. Oh! (*Enter* JAMES *in full evening dress.*) (*Exit the* MAID.)

JAMES. Elsie! What are you doing here?

JANET. She and I have been having a little chat. She's just going. Good-bye, Elsie.

ELSIE. Goo-good-bye! (*And out she goes, almost running.*)

JAMES. That's damned queer!

JANET. Yes, quite a coincidence, husband and wife meeting, and at the house of number one, too.

JAMES. I say, Janet, you're not ready! I asked you to be ready! You know how I hate to be kept waiting! . . .

JANET. Well, James, I got very interested in something Elsie told me, and then I had to telephone! . . .

JAMES. Telephone! Women are always telephoning. (*He picks up* PHILIP LOGAN'S *note to* JANET.)

JANET. I shan't be long. Sit down and look at the "Tatler." There's a good photograph of Mario in it!

JAMES. That damned dago! (*Reading the note.*) What does this mean?

JANET (*at the door*). What does what mean?

JAMES (*reading the note aloud*). "I'm not quite sure, Philip." (*She doesn't reply. She waves her arms in the air and laughs and laughs. And the—*

CURTAIN FALLS

ACT III

We are again in Mrs. Fraser's flat—six months after the date of the second act, and this time MRS. FRASER *is seated alone. She is restless and inattentive to the book she is reading. She puts it down and turns on the wireless set and listens to it for a while. She replaces some books on their shelves, after which she turns off the wireless and resumes her reading. She hears voices in the hall and starts up eagerly, and goes to the door and opens it.*

(PHILIP LOGAN *is heard talking to the* MAID.)

JANET (*with a little disappointment in her voice*). Oh, it's you, Philip! (*She returns to her seat.*)

PHILIP (*entering*). Yes.

JANET. I thought perhaps one of the boys! . . .

PHILIP (*shutting the door and coming down to her*). Do you know that Mabel wasn't going to let me in?

JANET. I told her I was not at home to anybody today. I forgot about you, Philip.

PHILIP. Well, in a sense that's a compliment, but I don't think that Mabel need have been so obstinate. After all, she knows me, and I've always been pretty decent to her! . . .

JANET. I've had her a long time now, Philip, since before the divorce, and she's feeling rather romantic today.

PHILIP. Romantic!

JANET. Yes. Of course, she's very respectful about it, but she keeps on remarking that it'll soon be like old times again. She's a kind creature.

PHILIP. You oughtn't to allow that sort of thing. It's outrageous, this general assumption that you and

James are going to re-marry. (*He seats himself beside her.*) Listen, Janet, I've come here this afternoon to talk to you very seriously.

JANET. You're not going to propose to me again?

PHILIP. Yes, I am, but I don't think you should talk about it as if it were a weekly affair. I'm very sensitive, Janet, and I must say I was deeply hurt when Mabel took it for granted that I'd be in the way.

JANET. I'm sorry, Philip.

PHILIP. I needn't tell you that I love you?

JANET. No, Philip, you needn't.

PHILIP. I've loved you for a very long time!

JANET. Yes, dear! . . .

PHILIP. Before James loved you, I loved you, and I continued to love you after he left you. I shall love you as long as I live.

JANET. Dear Philip!

PHILIP. I suppose I am a ridiculous old fellow! . . .

JANET (*sympathetic at once*). Oh, no, my dear, no!

PHILIP. James' contempt for me is almost comic. But whether I'm ridiculous or not, Janet, you have been the one romance of my life. So I ask you again—I don't know how often I've asked you before—to marry me.

JANET (*shaking her head*). No, my dear, I can't! . . .

PHILIP. I'm terribly in earnest, Janet.

JANET. I hope you always have been.

PHILIP. Yes, but I'm terribly in earnest to-day. (*He glances at his watch.*) By this time, James has got his decree, and I don't suppose he'll be fool enough to lose any time in getting here. That's why I've come. I thought I'd get here before him.

JANET. It's the first time in your life you've ever been ahead of him, Philip.

PHILIP. I don't like the pride in your voice when you say that. It sounds ominous. Will you marry me, Janet?

JANET. No, my dear, no!

PHILIP. Are you going to marry him?

JANET. Nobody's axed me, sir, she said! . . . Even if he wants to marry me, he can't until the decree has been made absolute.

PHILIP. That won't prevent him from having an understanding with you. He's the sort of man who'd get you to sign an agreement to marry him, and then go out and get it stamped. Thank heaven, I've still got six months in which to fight him for you.

JANET. Doesn't that sound like the cinema? Two strong men fighting for the likes of me.

PHILIP. Judged by any decent standards, James is a bad man.

JANET. Yes, he is a bad man . . . in a sense . . . but I love him, Philip.

PHILIP. You still love him . . . after everything?

JANET. Yes.

PHILIP. Then you *are* going to marry him?

JANET. I think so. I hardly know! I'm so bewildered, I! . . . Oh, don't question me, Philip.

PHILIP. You're fond of me, aren't you?

JANET. That's all I am, Philip.

PHILIP. Well, that's a good deal in these times. A feeling of affection is a fine foundation for a marriage.

JANET. Yes, it is, but unreasonable love is better.

PHILIP. Nothing would give me greater happiness than to consider your wishes in everything.

JANET. I'm sure you mean that, Philip, but you'd find it very galling if I asked you to take me to Paris just when you wanted to go fishing.

PHILIP. No, I shouldn't. I like Paris.

JANET. Oh, yes, you would, Philip. You'd prefer to have me sitting by a river, saying nothing, while you fished.

PHILIP. Well, that would be pleasant, but I wouldn't be obstinate about it.

JANET. And you'd like me to fish, too, and wear waders and breeches.

PHILIP (*gallantly*). You'd look magnificent in 'em!

I think it's a good thing for a husband and wife to share each other's tastes.

JANET. My dear, don't you mean that it's a good thing for a wife to share her husband's tastes?

PHILIP. Now, look here, Janet, I'm not asking you to take part in a feminist argument! I'm asking you to marry me.

JANET. But I hate fish, Philip. They're such wet things! And I'd be bored to death in fishing-inns, knitting while you and the other fishermen told each other frightful lies. I can only imagine myself marrying a fisherman if I were so desperately in love with him that I'd gladly collect worms for him.

PHILIP. My God, Janet, I don't use worms!

JANET. You see! We're quarreling already! That's what fishing would do to us.

PHILIP. I'm not so keen on fishing as all that!

JANET. Yes, you are! . . . No, not another word, Philip! You will continue to be my dear friend. Every Tuesday evening you'll take me out to dinner and then to a theatre. We won't discuss the subject again.

PHILIP. I wouldn't mind being chucked by you, if I thought you were going to chuck James, too!

JANET. Oh, Philip, what a nature!

PHILIP. I've had a wasted sort of life—no home, no wife, no anything!

JANET. You've got fish!

PHILIP. There's not much satisfaction in fish. Have you heard anything of Elsie lately?

JANET. No. She's living with Larne, of course!

PHILIP. I wonder if it was she who was with that fellow—what was his name?

JANET. Who? What fellow?

PHILIP. You know—the dago dancer who was at the Half-and-Half.

JANET. Oh, yes, I remember now! Do you know, I'd forgotten all about that! But it wasn't Elsie! As a matter of fact, she bolted with Larne that very evening.

PHILIP. Did she, begad! (*The door opens and* ALICE *enters, followed by* NINIAN *and* MURDO.)

ALICE. It's all over—bar the shouting! Hillo, Uncle Philip!

MURDO. Yes, the whole thing went through very satisfactorily!

NINIAN. It was one of our nicest divorces. (*Greetings between* NINIAN *and* PHILIP.)

JANET. Where's your father?

MURDO. He's coming! There were a few things to settle, and we came on ahead of him to see that . . . well, that you and he wouldn't be bothered by anybody! . . .

JANET. My dear!

PHILIP. That's all right, Murdo! Don't mind me! I've already asked your mother to marry me, and been refused!

ALICE. Oh, poor Uncle Philip! (*To* JANET.) Darling, couldn't you? . . .

JANET. Run away home, Philip!

PHILIP. I certainly have no wish to be here when the fatted calf is brought in!

ALICE. Wicked, wicked words! Where do you think you'll go when you die?

PHILIP. To the same place as Janet, I hope. Good-bye, my dear!

ALICE. Good-bye, Uncle! And here's a nice niecely kiss for you! (*Kisses him.*)

PHILIP (*to* JANET). Good-bye!

JANET. Don't forget, I'm dining with you on Tuesday.

PHILIP. I shan't forget! (*At the door.*) Oh, and just tell James that, will you?

JANET. I'll tell him.

PHILIP. I'd like him to know! Good-bye! (*Exit.*)

MURDO. Dining with him on Tuesday?

JANET. Yes, Murdo, I generally dine with him then.

MURDO. Yes, but! . . .

JANET. But what?

MURDO. Well, things are different now!

JANET. Different?

NINIAN. Things are exactly as they were before!

MURDO. No, they're not, and if you weren't so obstinate, you'd realise that! Father is free—or will be in six months' time. And that makes a difference. I've been seeing a lot of father lately! . . . He's a much humbler man than he used to be!

NINIAN. So I should think!

ALICE. It can't be very uplifting to find yourself not wanted by two women! . . .

JANET. One woman, my dear! Only one woman! I was not at all anxious to be rid of James! . . .

MURDO (*eagerly*). Then, mother, you'll have him back, won't you?

JANET. My dear, I've not been asked! . . .

MURDO. Oh, you'll be asked, all right! I can't tell you how delighted I shall be to see you two happy again! . . .

JANET. Happy?

MURDO. Of course. You're bound to be happy together—after all this trouble!

ALICE. Murdo takes an awful lot for granted!

NINIAN (*to* MURDO). You seem to imagine that because *you* want father and mother married again, *she* must want it too. It's enough for her, I suppose, that your smug respectability is satisfied! . . .

MURDO. That's not true! And I'm not smug!

NINIAN. It is true! And you are smug! Ever since you heard of the divorce between father and Elsie, you've been rubbing your hands with joy at the thought that mother would marry him again and make *you* happy. *You!* Not one thought about *her!* But what does your happiness matter compared with mother's?

MURDO. How dare you speak to me like that?

JANET. Children; children!

NINIAN. I'm sorry, mother, but I'm sick to death of

hearing Murdo say how happy *he* would be if you and father were married again.

MURDO. In my opinion, mother ought never to have divorced father. I've said that before, and I'll say it again! She should have sat tight and waited!

JANET. For what?

MURDO. For father to come back! There are a lot of things that women have to forgive in men, and infidelity is one of them.

ALICE. I warn you, Murdo, that I won't forgive it in you!

MURDO. There's no need to be coarse! Anyhow, that's my point of view! Family life has lasted a long time!

NINIAN. I said nothing about family life, or any other sort of life. All I said was that I wouldn't have mother bullied into marrying father! . . .

MURDO. Bullied!

NINIAN. Yes, bullied! Just to satisfy your suburban desire for respectability!

MURDO. I may be suburban! . . .

ALICE. You are, darling! Early Twickenham!

MURDO. Really, it's useless trying to talk sensibly to Alice and Ninian! But I appeal to you, mother, as your elder son, not to let any light motive stand between you and father!

JANET. *Light* motive?

MURDO. Well, feelings of resentment!

NINIAN. Wouldn't it be natural if she did?

MURDO. Mother's more magnanimous than that!

JANET. It's my turn to speak. I've been a good, docile mother long enough! I've sat here quietly listening to my betters arranging my life for me! . . .

MURDO. } Mother!
NINIAN. }

ALICE. I didn't mean to be bossy.

JANET. No, darling, I know you didn't! Well, now, I've listened to you all, and I think I know quite clearly

what's in your minds! Your points of view are extremely interesting! Murdo's opinions on family life are most impressive, and I hope that he will continue to hold them when he has a family! . . . By the way, are you two going to have any children?

MURDO. Certainly, when we can afford them!

ALICE. Personally, I want to be quite sure that I'd like Murdo to be the father of my babies, before I have any!

MURDO. That's how she always talks! Flippant! Never serious! . . .

JANET (*to* ALICE). I doubt, my dear, if you can lead a married life on the hire-purchase system—money returned if customers are not satisfied! There's a good deal to be said for taking a chance! However, that's not what I started to say! You must have noticed—or were you too busy telling me your opinions to notice that I hadn't told you mine?

MURDO. Are you going to marry him?

NINIAN. Murdo!

JANET. I think, my dears, all three of you, that that's a question which only your father has the right to ask! (*The door opens and the* MAID *enters.*) Yes, Mabel?

MABEL (*rather thrilled*). Here's the master, ma'am!

JANET. The master?

MABEL. I mean Mr. Fraser, ma'am! He's just come in! He's washing his hands!

JANET. All right, Mabel! (*Exit* MAID.)

ALICE. How frightfully funny! She called him the master.

MURDO (*reprovingly*). Alice! We won't stay, mother! Ninian, you'd better come, too!

NINIAN. I live here!

MURDO. Don't be so thick!

JANET. Yes, Ninian, go with Murdo and Alice. Take him home with you, Murdo, and tell him some more about the beauties of family life.

ALICE (*kissing her*). Darling, you're delicious! (*Rises.*) (*The door opens, and* JAMES *enters.*)

JAMES (*not so pleased to see his children*). Oh, Murdo, I! . . .

MURDO. We're just going, father! Coming, Ninian? (*Exeunt* MURDO *and* ALICE.)

NINIAN. Father!

JAMES. Yes, my boy!

(JANET *rises and gives* NINIAN *a look which makes him change his mind.*)

NINIAN. Oh, nothing! I! . . . All right, Murdo, I'm coming. (*Exit.*)

JAMES. Well, it's all over, Janet, and thank heaven for that! It's been a very wearing business for me.

JANET. I'm sure it has.

JAMES. Very wearing! There can't be many men who've had to endure what I've put up with. Oh, thank you, Janet, of course, for all you've done for me.

JANET. Not at all, James.

JAMES. I'm obliged to you, of course. Yes! But nobody will ever realise what I've gone through.

JANET. I do, James.

JAMES. You? Oh, yes, yes! I was forgetting for the moment. It's a comfort to think there's somebody in the world that can sympathise with me. When I think of what I've suffered for that woman . . . but there, it's all over and done with. It's *all* over *and* done with! Aye, aye, aye! Yes! . . . (*A pause.*) I've been thinking about the future, Janet.

JANET (*trying to restrain her eagerness*). Yes, James?

JAMES. As you perfectly appreciate, Janet, this has been a very upsetting and exhausting affair for me. I'm not showing all I've felt, but it isn't the people who show their feelings who suffer the most. I need change and rest, I want to get away from everything and everybody, and I think it would be a good plan for me to take a trip round the world. That'll do me a bit of good

. . . take my mind off things . . . and, of course, it'll give people time to forget about the divorce.

JANET (*feeling awful*). Yes.

JAMES. I can't bear to think of people talking about me, and I'd rather they got it over and done with while I'm out of the country. Don't you think that's a good plan?

JANET. Oh, quite, James, quite!

JAMES. I've always had a great fancy to go round the world, but somehow I've never had time. Now's my chance! I can knock about the East for a while, look at India and China and Japan and Australia—and then, mebbe, go on to America and have a look at it.

JANET. That'll be very nice for you!

JAMES. That's what I thought. Do you know, Janet, when I was sitting in that Court to-day, listening to the lawyers droning my marriage away, I said to myself: "I haven't deserved this! I *have not* deserved it!" You'd nearly think, to hear lawyers, that the break-up of a man's marriage was nothing but a formality.

JANET. Yes, wouldn't you?

JAMES. However, it's done, and what's done can't be undone. I never was one to cry over spilt milk.

JANET. You haven't very often had to cry over it, James.

JAMES. Oh, I've had my fair share of trouble, Janet. You mustn't think that *our* divorce—yours and mine—was any pleasure to me. Oh, no! It was not, indeed. You've had your trouble, but I've had mine, too. Of course, I've faced it. Whatever I am, Janet, I'm not what you'd call a flabby sort of a fellow that lets himself be downfaced by adversity. Oh, no! I can stand up to things, and give as good as I get. That's a fact, isn't it?

JANET. Yes, I'd agree to that.

JAMES. There are plenty of men who'd be knocked

out by a blow such as I've had, but it'll take a lot more than this to knock *me* out! I don't want to pat myself on the back or blow my own trumpet, but I must say I've taken this stroke with great fortitude.

JANET. Yes, James.

JAMES. When I come back from this trip, I think I'll live in the country. I've always had a fancy for country life—you know, chickens and bees and home-grown vegetables. It's a fine thing to be able to take your own lettuces straight off the ground. You know they're fresh, anyway! And then, there's no need now for me to work so hard as I have done hitherto. Elsie was a very expensive young woman to maintain, and I shall be able to live more economically now! . . . Well, that's my idea—to come back and live in the country. Will that suit you?

JANET (*astonished*). Me!

JAMES. Yes.

JANET. Are you making me a delicate offer of marriage, James, or are you just asking for information about country life?

JAMES. Of course, I'm asking you to marry me. I thought you understood that. It occurred to me that it would be very nice for us both to grow old together in the country, settle down in peace and quietness. . . .

JANET. I didn't quite grasp the idea!

JAMES. Do you think you could overlook the past, and marry me again? Of course, you understand that this must be kept strictly between ourselves. If the King's Proctor got to hear about it, my decree would be rescinded and there'd be no marriage for you or me. Or Elsie. But in six months' time, everything will be all right, and we can get married without any bother or hindrance whatever.

JANET. This is the second proposal I've had to-day.

JAMES. Second!

JANET. Yes. Philip proposed to me about an hour ago.

JAMES. Had he the damned nerve to ask you to marry him?

JANET. He had. Why shouldn't he?

JAMES. But he must have known that I meant to ask you myself.

JANET. He did. That's why he came first! I'm very fond of Philip!

JAMES. Fond of him! . . . Well, yes, I can understand that in a way. Women are very prone to like a weak man, and he's an amiable sort of chap. (*A horrible fear fills his mind.*) My God, Janet, you haven't accepted him!

JANET. I dallied with the idea!

JAMES (*in a panic now*). But did you?

JANET. No, I refused him.

JAMES (*recovering himself*). Of course you did. How stupid of me to imagine for one second that you could take him! A woman of your sensibility wouldn't throw herself away on a man like that. What has *he* ever done . . . except enjoy himself? Why, the man's an angler. Anybody with an active mind 'ud go mad if he had to sit for hours holding a worm in front of a fish.

JANET. Don't be ignorant, James. Philip doesn't use worms; he uses flies.

JAMES. What difference does that make when it's the same fellow at the other end of the stick?

JANET. Rod, James, *rod*—not stick.

JAMES. But don't let's bother our heads about him any more. Talk about us. My suggestion, Janet, is that when I return from my trip round the world—by which time the decree will be absolute—we get married and settle in a cottage in the country. Scotland, if you like, but I have a fancy myself for the South of England.

JANET. Most Scotsmen have, James!

JAMES. Well, that's not unnatural. It's a softer climate and the people are a bit more congenial, though I wouldn't admit it to them. Will that suit you, Janet?

JANET. No, James, it won't suit me at all.

JAMES. Well, what will suit you? I'm prepared to fall in with any reasonable suggestion you have to make, although I should have thought that, with six months and mebbe more to get ready, you'd be glad to get the ceremony over as quickly as possible. It isn't as if you were a young girl and had to have lot of fal-lals, is it?

JANET. No, it isn't. But you've misunderstood me, James. I'm not asking for more time.

JAMES. Then what are you asking for?

JANET. I'm not going to marry you at all.

JAMES. Not going to marry me! What do you mean?

JANET. Just what I say. I'm refusing you just as I refused Philip, but not for the same reason.

JAMES (*scarcely able to believe his ears*). Oh!

JANET. I won't marry you, James.

JAMES (*recovering himself and humouring the woman*). Now come, Janet, don't be foolish.

JANET. I'll try not to. It must be very difficult for you to believe that I've not been waiting here for you to come and propose to me, and I won't deny that I've thought about it. I've thought a great deal about it. I've lain awake at night wondering what I should do.

JAMES. What's there to wonder about?

JANET. Oh, a hundred and one things, James.

JAMES. Of course, I know that I'm a damaged specimen. . . .

JANET. Don't business men call it "loss through depreciation"?

JAMES. Still I was good enough to be your husband before . . .

JANET. And you see no reason why you shouldn't be my husband after? You're rather vain, James.

JAMES. I wouldn't have called myself that.

JANET. No, you wouldn't, but I should!

JAMES. Well, perhaps I am. After all, a man with any stuff in him is always a bit conceited. Will you marry me?

JANET. No.

JAMES. Why? Because I ran off with Elsie? (*She doesn't answer.*) But supposing I hadn't been divorced, and had just gone off with Elsie or some other woman for a while? Would you have taken me back?

JANET. Probably!

JAMES. Well, then! What's the difference?

JANET. There is a difference, James. Any man may be unfaithful to his wife and not care a snap of his fingers for the other woman. But Elsie was not your mistress, James; you married her. You gave me no peace until I had agreed to divorce you. That was deliberate. You meant to get rid of me. Even now, if Elsie would come back to you, you would forgive her! . . .

JAMES. No. I can never forgive her! . . .

JANET. But you expect me to forgive you. . . . You frightened me when you first came in, James. I thought you weren't going to ask me . . .

JAMES. But I did.

JANET. Yes, you remembered just in time, didn't you? But it was too late then. While you were talking of your plans and your sufferings, I began to change my mind about marrying you. You didn't say a single word, James, that showed any consideration whatever for me. You only asked me to marry you as a sort of afterthought . . . when you'd settled your trip round the world. You'll go to China and India and Japan, and, perhaps America, and then you'll come home and marry poor old Janet. That'll please the old girl!

JAMES. Really, Janet, is that fair? I ask you.

JANET. You almost made me feel that you wanted to economise on me.

JAMES. No, that's not fair. That's catty, and just like a woman, too.

JANET. Well, what am I to think? You talked of going to live in the country. I prefer London. You said you wouldn't have to work so hard now you'd got

rid of Elsie. Apparently, I shall be much cheaper to maintain. But that's where you're mistaken. I'm just as costly as she is, every bit. You once gave her a very beautiful pearl necklace. Perhaps I'd like one, too.

JAMES. You can have it.

JANET. But that's not the point.

JAMES. Well, what is?

JANET. Why do you want to marry me?

JAMES. I'm fond of you. Besides, it seems right. Everybody expects us to marry. Murdo's got his heart set on it.

JANET. Have you got yours?

JAMES. Of course, I have.

JANET. Listen, James, I lived with you for twenty years, a devoted and a loyal wife. At the end of that time you discarded me . . . wait, I haven't done yet. I don't mind telling you now, that I felt that my life was finished then.

JAMES. You had the boys.

JANET. They were at school. All the people I knew ceased to have any real relation to me. . . . I suppose you don't realise how much of her life a married woman spends in entertaining her husband's friends and being bored to death by people who don't interest her.

JAMES. Did my friends bore you?

JANET. Some of them did, dreadfully, but I had to be civil to them because they were important from a business point of view. You never had much time for my friends, and they gradually dropped out of my life. When the divorce came, I had nobody. I was a very lonely woman. But I'm like you—it takes more than a blow like that to knock me out. I started to make my life again. It was no longer necessary to think all the time of what you wanted to do, and I began to do things that I wouldn't have dreamt of doing when we were married. I joined societies. Some of them bored me, but one or two of them were interesting. I went to concerts. You hate music, don't you?

JAMES. I've been to the opera a few times.

JANET. You never would go with me. Well, I joined a little club that met in a private house to listen to chamber music. I'm rather fond of chamber music.

JAMES. I used to take you to the theatre.

JANET. Oh, but, my dear James, what sort of plays did you take me to? You wouldn't go to anything but musical comedy. You were always too tired in the evening to go to anything else. I did all sorts of things and went to all sorts of places and made a great many friends. I dine with Philip every Tuesday.

JAMES. Well, I wouldn't object to that. Perhaps he'd ask me, too.

JANET. No, I don't think Philip would like that. So you see, James, I've succeeded in making a very pleasant and agreeable life. I'm valued for myself, and not merely as somebody's wife. You would cut no ice at all with my friends. I cut a lot.

JAMES. A gang of highbrows, I suppose?

JANET. No—just ordinarily nice intelligent people. If I married you, I should have to give up that life, and all I shall get in exchange is a cottage in the country where I can help you to economise. I'm to feed the chickens and hive the bees and gather me cabbages while I may, and be grateful for a quiet home and a repentant husband. . . .

JAMES. Well, everything seems to be thoroughly messed up. I suppose this is the end of things for us.

JANET. Oh, no! You can take me out to dinner and a theatre once a week. Any day except Tuesday. That's Philip's evening.

JAMES. I don't think I want to share you with Philip.

JANET. Oh! Isn't that selfish of you?

JAMES. This last while back, I've been cheering myself up with the thought that you and I would settle down again, but of course, if you're determined not to marry me. (*He waits for her to say something, but she*

does not speak. Then a little bewildered he goes on.) This isn't quite what I expected from you, Janet, but, of course, I can't reasonably complain. You're entitled to get a bit of your own back. (*He pauses again, but she does not speak. He gets up.*) Well, I'll say "good-bye." (JANET *rises too.*)

JANET. Good-bye, James.

JAMES. I mean to say, Janet, this is "good-bye." For good!

JANET. For good?

JAMES. Yes.

JANET. Very well, James. (*The telephone bell rings.*) (*Answering.*) Hillo! Oh, hillo, Philip . . .

JAMES. Tell him to go to hell!

JANET (*into the telephone*). No, that was James. He says you're to go to hell. No, I shouldn't if I were you. Well, yes, if you want to, but I'm too tired to go out or to see anybody. . . . Something for me! Yes, all right, send it along. No. No, I'm not . . . not to anybody. Yes, I know, Philip, you've said all that before.

JAMES (*seizing the receiver from her*). Ring off, blast you. (*He bangs the receiver back on its receptacle.*)

JANET. That was very rude of you, James. You mustn't treat Philip like that. You'd better go now.

JAMES. All right. I'm going. (*He walks to the door, but stops before he reaches it.*) Good-bye, Janet. (*They shake hands.*) It's a pity of course. (*He turns to go.*) A great pity! (*He stands at the door, with his hand on the handle for a moment. Then he turns to look at her. They do not speak. Then he opens the door.*) Did that fellow Philip say he was sending you a present or something?

JANET. Yes.

JAMES. What is it?

JANET. I don't know. He said it was a little surprise for me.

JAMES. I'll surprise him one of these days. (*He goes out so suddenly that* JANET *is left aghast.*)

(*She waits for a moment and then goes towards the door. As she does so, the sound of the street door shutting is heard. She gives a little gasp, and then shuts the door and goes to the window and looks out. Then she gazes around the room and murmurs: "Yes, you've made a very pleasant and agreeable life for yourself, Janet, you fool!"—and returns to her seat. In a moment or two the door is opened and the* MAID *enters.*)

MABEL. Mr. Fraser's gone, ma'am!

JANET. Yes, Mabel.

MABEL. I was just going to bring in the tea. Perhaps he'll be back presently.

JANET. No, he's not coming back at all. You'd better bring it in now.

MABEL. For one, ma'am?

JANET. Yes, Mabel, for one . . . unless Mr. Ninian comes in.

MABEL (*whose taste for romance is outraged by all this*). Very well, ma'am. (*She goes out—and* JANET *fidgets about the room. She turns on the wireless set again. It is the Children's Hour, and Uncle Jehosaphat is congratulating Little Willie Morton of Newton Poppleford on achieving his ninth birthday!* JANET *turns it off, and returns to her seat. The* MAID *enters, carrying a tea-tray which she places in front of her mistress.*)

JANET. Thank you, Mabel.

MABEL. Is there anything else I can do for you, madam?

JANET. No, thank you, Mabel.

MABEL. Very well, madam . . . (*She pauses awkwardly, and then with a gulp, says her say*) only . . . if you'll allow me to say so, madam!

JANET. Say what, Mabel?

MABEL. I think it's a pity, madam, I do think it's a pity. . . . (*Her feelings are too much for her, and she bolts for the door. As she reaches it,* NINIAN *enters.*

She narrowly escapes colliding with him.) (*To* NINIAN.) Sorry, sir! (*Exit.*)

NINIAN. What's up with Mabel?

JANET. Mabel! I don't know. You're back early, Ninian.

NINIAN. Yes. Murdo and I had a row, so I left him and Alice, and came back.

JANET. You're a very quarrelsome boy. Will you have some tea?

NINIAN. Thanks.

(*The door opens and the* MAID *enters, with a cup and saucer, etc.*)

MABEL. I thought Mr. Ninian would want some tea, ma'am!

JANET. Thank you, Mabel. (*Exit* MAID.)

NINIAN (*when she has gone*). Mother?

JANET. Yes, my dear!

NINIAN. I don't want to pry . . . but have you?

JANET. No.

NINIAN. You haven't. . . . Didn't he ask you?

JANET. Oh, Ninian, that really is the worst thing that's been said to me to-day.

NINIAN. I'm sorry, mother. Of course he asked you. And you refused him?

JANET. Yes.

NINIAN. Hurray! I am glad.

JANET. I'm not.

NINIAN. But, mother, you don't mean to say . . .

JANET. Yes, I do mean to say. There's your tea. Drink it and don't talk so much. I'm getting very tired of garrulous children. One of these days, there will be a terrible revolt of the old against the young.

NINIAN (*properly abashed*). I'm very sorry, mother. Of course, I'm only thinking of your happiness.

JANET. Too many people are only thinking of my happiness. They're making me thoroughly miserable. (*The* MAID *enters with a parcel.*) What is it, Mabel?

MABEL. A special messenger brought this, ma'am.

JANET. Oh, yes. I know what it is. Put it down, please! (*The* MAID *does so and retires.*) It's from Philip. He said he was sending me a surprise.

NINIAN. I suppose you're not going to marry *him*?

JANET. You can suppose anything you like! More tea?

NINIAN (*passing his cup to her*). Thanks. (*He glances at the parcel.*) This is from Jones, the jeweller round the corner.

JANET. Round the corner!

NINIAN. Yes.

JANET. Here, take your tea and hand me that! (NINIAN *does so and she nervously undoes the parcel.*) You know, you're much too inquisitive, Ninian. Always prying into other people's business.

(*The parcel is undone. It contains a jewel-box which she opens. Inside is a lovely pearl necklace. She takes it out and looks at it, momentarily unable to speak.*)

NINIAN. Great Scott, it's a pearl necklace!

JANET. So it is.

NINIAN. Uncle Philip's splashing his money about, isn't he?

JANET. It isn't your Uncle Philip, you fool. It's your father.

NINIAN. Father!

JANET. Yes. He's beginning to court me all over again . . . and I rather like it, Ninian. . . .

(*She gives a little gurgle of joy as she fastens the necklace round her throat*) *and*—

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

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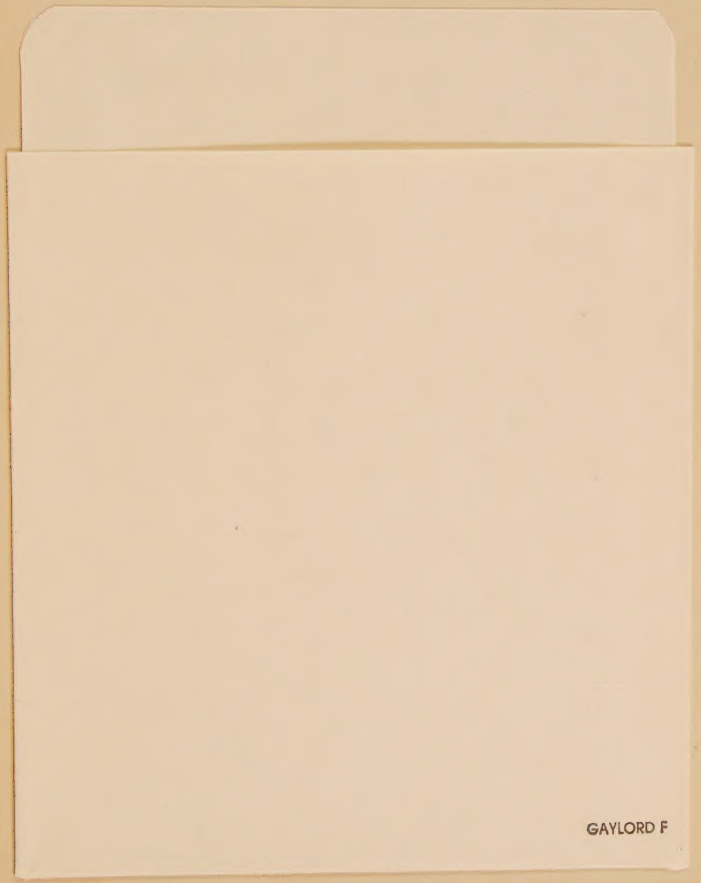

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